

Books: Their Role in Research

What materials are selected for a research project will be determined by the topic and the scope of the project. Routinely, those materials might include books, government documents, magazine articles, newspaper articles, and journal articles. University level academic research papers normally will not include magazine and newspaper articles since they do not actually present research and are geared more to the lay reader. There are exceptions, however. For example, a research project that examines changes in advertisements for men's clothing over a span of one hundred years will by necessity include magazine and newspaper articles. The choice of sources, again, will be determined by the focus of the project.



An academic paper will rely heavily on articles written by experts and published in professional journals as well as on scholarly books that draw heavily on research coming from a variety of sources. Books can be invaluable sources for extended scholarly research and should be considered as integral parts of the research arsenal. A researcher should use due care in evaluating books as resources just as he/she would carefully evaluate articles or any other sources being considered for inclusion. Some books are written with a more general or popular audience in mind, others might target a technical or occupational audience, while others might be focused on an academic or scholarly audience. In general, academic/scholarly books are preferable for doing academic research.

Some Key Things to Consider When Selecting Books

Authorship -- Books under consideration for inclusion in a research project should be carefully examined for authorship just as with any other materials being considered. Who is the author? What qualifications does the author possess that places him/her in a position to be an authority on the subject being covered? Has the author written other works, either articles or books, on the same or similar subjects? These are all important questions to ask as a part of the book selection process. If the author's background cannot be determined, even though his/her work has been published in the book being considered, the researcher should use due skepticism in selecting this work.

Documentation -- Is the information included in the work under consideration well-documented? Does the book acknowledge work by other experts as a part of what it does? Even the most learned scholar will call on other experts in his/her writing to help flesh out ideas. The call to authority in presenting information is a well-respected tradition in academic writing and the researcher will be served well by publications that follow this tradition and clearly present documentation in support of ideas that have come from other experts in a field. Most scholarly/academic works include copious notes and references reflecting a thorough survey of important literature that has been published before.

Timeliness -- How recently published is the book? Is this a reprint of an earlier edition possibly ten or more years older? To say that recency of publication is important is nearly an understatement of how important it is to have the most current information available for research. Books, just by their nature and by the nature of the publishing process itself, are already slightly out of date by the time they are published. While the process has been speeded up tremendously because of technology, by the time a book goes through all the vetting and editing and proofing that are parts of the publication process, it will be a bit dated. This is not to say that a book should not be considered. On the contrary, it should be included, but the information should be updated if possible.

Publisher -- Who is the publisher? Is this an academic press? Is this a university press? Is this a commercial publisher and, if so, is the publisher noted for publishing reputable, scholarly materials? While the publisher alone might not be the most important thing to consider when evaluating a book for selection, it is of some consequence. University and academic presses will normally direct their publishing activities toward scholarly, research publications. This does not mean that commercial publishers don't publish academic, scholarly works, just that they also will publish to suit the "popular appetite." Many important works of scholarship might also be picked up by so-called "small presses" that cater to limited audiences and smaller press runs. In fact, many works of literature find publication by small presses instead of by mass market publishers.

How Books Can Help in the Research Project

Only the most recent of topics will not be covered by books. As research sources, books are excellent means for identifying various areas of interest within a larger subject. For example, a book that focuses on cloud computing will break down this larger subject into smaller areas, such as security, costs, and ease of use, and help a researcher discover what work has already been done and what work still needs to be done. Always good starting places for most research projects, books can prove invaluable for their depth and breadth of coverage.

Book features that can be of great benefit to researchers include:

References -- Scholarly works will normally document sources used in developing concepts and ideas treated within them. Bibliographies included in books will provide researchers with names of seminal works in the field as well as with names of key authorities in their areas of interest.

Key Concepts & Terminology -- Researchers who are just launching into an investigation of a topic will likely need to identify key concepts and terminology in order to effectively scan research databases for relevant current literature. Books, because of the depth with which they cover their topics, will be prime sources to use for turning up the proper vocabulary to use in searches. Often times, books also will point out research needs that have yet to be fulfilled, thus providing researchers with ideas for future research directions.

Detailed Index or Table of Contents -- While it might seem trivial, an index at the back of a book is extremely valuable to a researcher who is trying to quickly locate information inside a book. If a book does not have an index, it will hopefully have a more detailed table of contents that will assist the user in finding the needed information quickly.

Charts, tables, graphs, and other illustrative materials -- Often books will include illustrative materials that will help clarify concepts that are covered. Some topics, such as art and photography, for example, cannot be effectively presented in the absence of visual aids. Charts and graphs can be particularly helpful for illustrating numerical data that demonstrate changes over time or under varying conditions. Numerical data sets are more easily grasped when presented in tables. In short, illustrations can be of great value in helping a researcher to better understand complex concepts and ideas.

Literature surveys or reviews -- Many academic publications will routinely include literature surveys or reviews. A part of the research process is to identify key works of literature that have already been produced before launching into new studies. A book that includes chapters or sections written by multiple researchers might include literature surveys for each of the separate parts of the book.

These are typical features but by no means everything that could turn up inside a book. For example, works on history might include reproductions of historic documents or manuscripts that might otherwise be difficult to obtain. Works on rare and endangered species of animals might include photographs of species that very few people have ever seen. Books on music might actually include music discs that sample a particular composer's style. In short, books provide key contributions to research projects.

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