

A Typology of Sources

The research process will bring you into contact with several different kinds of sources. This guide is designed to help you identify the sources you are working with and contextualize the evidence and information you draw from them.

In this guide, you will learn about:

- Reference sources
- Popular press sources
- Trade publications
- “Parascholarly” publications
- Scholarly press sources

Aren't There Other Kinds of Sources?

Of course. Any typology of the wide variety of materials you might use as sources necessarily simplifies the research process.

This guide suggests some of the ways you might use these kinds of sources, but you may find other uses for them in your research process. Let your research question lead you to a research method that makes sense.

Descriptions

Reference Sources

You will frequently use encyclopedias and dictionaries as reference sources. While you are probably familiar with general purpose reference sources like *Webster's Dictionary* or *Wikipedia*, keep in mind that there are highly specialized

reference sources for different professions, disciplines, and fields. These sources are indispensable in the early stages of the research process.

Popular Press Sources

These are magazines, newspapers, and books intended to inform or entertain general audiences. They sometimes feature lavish illustrations, rarely include citations, and - in the case of periodicals - often include many advertisements.

Trade Publications

Many industries, businesses, or organizations have one or more publications that address practical concerns of people in a profession. This may include news specific to the profession, reports on major developments in the field, targeted advertising,

or information about new technologies, regulations, or changes in the field. Trade periodicals often use the specialized vocabulary of the profession they serve.

“Parascholarly” Publications

“Parascholarly” is a coined term that indicates a genre of article or report that has all of the trappings of a scholarly research report or study but that is published at the behest of an interest group, NGO, think tank, for-profit research organization, Federal Advisory

Committee, government commission, or one of several influential ideologically-driven organizations.

Scholarly Press Sources

Scholarly articles are articles written by academics or scholars for an audience of other academics or scholars. These articles usually report the findings of a study or research project in a way that contributes to an ongoing debate, fills a gap in the knowledge

on a topic, or intervenes by pointing out limitations to what scholars knew before.

Examples

Popular Press Sources

- *Money*
- *The New York Times*
- *The Washington Post*
- *Discover*
- *Smithsonian*
- *Popular Science*
- *Forbes*
- *Time Magazine*
- *The Wall Street Journal*
- *Psychology Today*
- *Atlantic*
- *National Geographic*
- *Wired*

Scholarly Press Sources

- *Cultural Anthropology*
- *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*
- *Journal of Applied Psychology*
- *Journal of Economic Literature*
- *Journal of American History*
- *Journal of the American Chemical Society*
- *Communication, Culture, and Critique*
- *Journal of the American Medical Association*

Trade Publications

- *APA Monitor*
- *Communication Arts*
- *College & Research Library News*
- *Museums Journal*
- *Chemistry World*
- *Construction Equipment*
- *Mathematics Teacher*
- *Columbia Journalism Review*
- *Bar Journal*
- *Chronicle of Higher Education*
- *Advertising Age*

Reference Sources

- *The Oxford English Dictionary*
- *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Ed (DSM-V)*
- *The Encyclopedia of Ecology and Environmental Management*
- *Physician's Desk Reference*
- *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures*
- *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

"Parascholarly" Publications

- Reports and studies published by the Brookings Institute, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, RAND Corporation, Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Center for American Progress, Cato Institute, New America Foundation, Polaris Project, New America Foundation, ACLU, etc.
- Government reports on original research and reviews of scholarly literature

Author, Audience, Purpose

Reference Sources

Authors are often experts or scholars, but sometimes entries may be written by professional writers contracted by the publisher. Reference sources written for general audiences include *Wikipedia* or *Webster's Dictionary*, but specialized reference sources are used by scholars, professionals, and students. The purpose of these sources is usually to inform readers by summarizing and distilling a large number of complex topics within a single resource.

Popular Press Sources

Authors are usually journalists and paid professional writers. Mass market periodicals and books tend to address broad audiences, but many popular press sources address a specific demographic or marketing niche. The purpose of these sources is usually to entertain and inform while maintaining profitability by selling advertising space.

Trade Publications

Authors include journalists, professional writers, marketers, industry insiders, and spokespeople. The audiences addressed are typically professionals working for the covered business, industry, or organization. The purpose is generally to inform professionals about developments in their field. Trade publications also often offer a platform for targeted advertising, and it can be difficult to differentiate between advertising and content.

"Parascholarly" Publications

Authors vary considerably. Many are, in fact, experts and scholars who may or may not be paid for their contributions. Other authors may include paid consultants, government officials/appointees, lobbyists, or organization representatives. The intended audiences for these reports vary but often include policymakers, government contractors, and scholars or experts. Parascholarly literature often mobilizes a scholarly apparatus in the service of persuasive goal. The advancement of knowledge about a topic is usually one of several considerations and may be subordinated to ideological, political, or institutional objectives.

Scholarly Press Sources

Scholarly publications are the primary way that scholars and experts communicate the findings of their research to other scholars and experts. Authors of scholarly journal articles are almost never paid, and authors of scholarly books and monographs usually earn some money in the form of royalties, if they earn any at all. The purpose is generally service to a community of inquiry and is rewarded with prestige within that community. The primary purpose of these publications is the advancement of scholarly conversations, though scholarly publications are sometimes differentiated from each other by particular editorial biases or inclinations.

Reliability

Reference Sources

Reference sources generally try to fact-check their articles and sometimes include some kind of informal peer review process. Since they distill huge bodies of scholarship into shorter articles, they are not as reliable or nuanced as the underlying scholarship.

Popular Press Sources

Popular press sources are often the first source of information on a topic, making them valuable in the research process. Even so, the standards for fact-checking, journalistic ethics, fairness, and balance vary considerably between publications and over time. Generally, there is some kind of editorial process, but errors, misrepresentations, and outright fraud are surprisingly common.

Trade Publications

Trade journals are often published as a form of marketing or targeted advertising and usually reflect the norms, biases, or ideologies which circulate within a given profession. Even so, they often include insider accounts or representation of a profession and its practices.

“Parascholarly” Publications

Some parascholarly sources go through a peer review process, but the quality of this process is sometimes diminished when those reviewing articles have homogenous interests. There is usually an editorial board and/or official process of approval for such publications, but findings which go against the interests of the funding/publishing organization may be suppressed. Articles are often well-documented with a literature review and extensive citations, but the claims are sometimes biased and often shaped by their institutional context. These sources can be very useful but require vigilant background research and critical attention.

Scholarly Press Sources

The peer review process is designed to ensure the quality of published scholarly work. Additionally, scholars are expected to provide a critical apparatus which includes a literature review, extensive citations, and a thorough demonstration of all claims. Scholars are expected to use appropriate evidence generated and processed using a well-designed and transparently documented research method. Additionally, scholars are expected to adhere to institutionalized ethical norms.

Uses in the Research Process

Reference Sources

You will first use reference sources when exploring, selecting, and refining your topic. You may also find them useful when developing a list of keywords. Be sure to develop a broad understanding of the context and background of your topic so that you can frame a sophisticated preliminary question. This information will also help you develop the base knowledge you will need to begin making sense of scholarly sources. Later in the research process, reference sources will be a valuable tool for looking up terms and concepts you encounter in the scholarly literature.

Popular Press Sources

Popular press sources can inspire you to explore new topics. They can also give you background information about a topic or question. For some current events on which there are few scholarly articles, popular press articles may be the primary source of information; in this case, you should use the scholarly literature to identify theories, methods, and a body research on similar phenomena which will help you make sense of the evidence in the popular press literature. You can also use popular press sources as primary sources which document history or which demonstrate the way that mass media represent a phenomenon.

Trade Publications

Trade journals can sometimes give you insight into the particular jargon or terminology used by professionals in a field. This can be helpful when gathering a list of keywords for future searches. Trade journals can also help you understand how the state of scholarly knowledge affects everyday practical concerns in the field. Occasionally, trade journals can be primary sources.

“Parascholarly” Publications

Some government reports and studies published by think tanks, NGOs, and government commissions are of a very high quality, but they require a vigilant, critical eye, since they often represent a single perspective that is narrowly circumscribed by an institutional context or by an ideological orientation. You will usually want to put any evidence drawn from such sources in context by discussing the stake that the funding/publishing organization has in the findings.

Scholarly Press Sources

For most university-level research, the peer reviewed scholarly literature will be most important. The credibility of the authors and assurance of reliability offered by the peer review process observed by most scholarly journals make these good sources on which to base your research. You should, of course, carefully analyze the relationships between research questions, hypotheses, methods, evidence, and findings. Using these sources, you can find evidence relevant to your research question, theories that help you understand your topic, and examples of research methods that will help you shape your own research project.

Tips for Identifying Reference Sources

Publication Type

“Reference Guide,” etc.

These sources are often available in huge many-page or many-volume printed collections or online with an interface that explicitly identifies the source as an “Encyclopedia,” “Dictionary,”

Genre

from one reference source to another.

The writing is usually very economical, packing as much information as possible into the smallest space. Articles usually proceed from general to specific and vary in length considerably

Language

Clear, accessible language is the norm, but more specialized reference sources may be written for specialized audiences with some mastery of the jargon or terminology of the field.

Editorial Oversight

The extent and nature of editorial oversight and peer review varies considerably from one reference source to another.

Tips for Identifying Popular Press Sources

Publication Type

Printed popular press magazines often have glossy pages and/or many full-color illustrations, while printed newspapers do not. Magazines and newspapers often have many advertisements for

products not directly related to the content, though popular press books rarely include advertisements.

Genre

The writing is often more informal than in scholarly writing; there are rarely citations or references in magazines and newspapers and sometimes limited citations in popular press books. Popular

press publications rarely provide a formal report on original research and consequently lack a thorough literature review, methods section, etc.

Language

These sources are usually written with language accessible to a broad audience.

Editorial Oversight

Publishing houses and editors build their audiences based on reputation, but oversight is often less rigid than in other genres. In the case of journalism, there is often a group of fact-checkers who

take the articles apart piece-by-piece, but this is not a foolproof method, especially if the journalist has been sloppy or fraudulent. Some publishers make information about this process public, so it can help you identify popular press sources.

Tips for Identifying Trade Publications

Publication Name

Trade journals usually clearly identify the profession they address in the title.

Publication Type

Printed trade journals often have glossy pages and/or many full-color illustrations; they generally have advertisements relevant to professionals in the field.

Genre

The writing is often more informal than in scholarly writing; there may be citations or references, but there are generally fewer than in scholarly writing. The articles rarely provide a formal report on original research and consequently lack a thorough literature review, methods section, etc.

Language

These sources are usually written with language specific to professionals in the field.

Editorial Oversight

Usually the main consideration of editors for trade journals is whether an article will be of interest to professionals in the field. There is some variation in this, however. You can often find out about the editorial process by googling the publication.

Tips for Identifying “Parascholarly” Publications

Publication Name

Unlike scholarly journal articles, parascholarly literature is not usually published in journals. That said, there are a number of journals published by political or ideological interest groups that specialize in propagating only one kind of message.

First Page

Many parascholarly reports and studies include a cover page that identifies the organization sponsoring the report or the entity to whom the report was submitted.

Genre

Many parascholarly articles and reports will follow the genre conventions of scholarly literature.

Language

These sources are often written in language specific to scholars and/or professionals in the field.

Editorial Oversight

You can usually determine from indicators in the report itself, on the issuing agency’s or organization’s website, or from *Google* searches what kind of review, editorial oversight, or report approval process may (or may not) have occurred. This is information you will need in order to contextualize the information in the report.

Tips for Identifying Scholarly Press Sources

Publication Name

Many scholarly journals are called “*Journal of...*”

Publication Type

Printed scholarly journals rarely have glossy pages and usually have few full-color illustrations. They generally have few advertisements.

Bibliographic Information

Scholarly journals usually have issue and volume numbers; page numbers usually start at the beginning of the volume, rather than the beginning of the issue.

Genre

Most scholarly articles will have several of these features: abstract, keywords, literature review, extensive citations to other sources, methods section, theory section, findings/results section and/or a body with substantial analysis of some primary text(s), a conclusion, a references section.

Language

These sources are written in academic language specific to scholars in the field.

Editorial Oversight

Check the *UlrichsWeb* database to see if your periodical is refereed and has its content type listed as **Academic/Scholarly**. If it does not appear in *UlrichsWeb*, try googling the journal title. On the publisher’s website, look at the **About** page or submission guidelines for information about the peer review or refereeing process.

Finding Sources

Reference Sources

One good way to access specialized reference sources is to use the *Literati* database, but there are also print copies of many such reference sources in both university and public libraries.

Popular Press Sources

The *Lexis Nexis Academic* database is great for finding newspaper articles. *ProQuest Research Library* can be good for newspaper or magazine articles. Many popular press periodicals have a web presence, and popular press books are often available in libraries or bookstores.

Trade Publications

Subject-, field-, and discipline-specific databases like *EBSCO Business Source Complete* often provide trade sources alongside popular press and scholarly sources. You can find the names of publications associated with a specific organization using the *Encyclopedia of Associations* in the library.

“Parascholarly” Publications

These frequently appear in *Google* and *Google Scholar* searches. They are also usually easily searchable on the websites of sponsoring organizations or government agencies. You might find them mentioned in popular press articles on your topic. Particularly high-profile reports of this nature will be cited in some scholarly literature.

Scholarly Press Sources

General purpose databases like *EBSCO Academic Search Complete*, *ProQuest Research Library*, and *JSTOR* are a good place to start. Once you have a few articles, one great way to find more relevant scholarly articles is through the citations found in these articles. Later, you might try more specialized tools like *APA PsycNET*, *MLA International Bibliography*, or *MathSciNET*. There are also many subject-specific *EBSCO* and *ProQuest* databases you should explore after you have exhausted the general databases.