

Entering into the Conversation: Finding and Using Academic Sources

Understanding why academics publish articles and books and why they cite other authors will help you to both find and use academic sources. Academics write articles and books in order to share their research findings and advance human knowledge. All academic writing is part of a conversation between specialists on a particular topic. Academic authors position their own research within this ongoing conversation by citing, summarizing, and agreeing with or disputing other research in their areas.

Types of Academic Sources

Academic Journal Articles

Journal articles are the most common form of academic publication. Articles pushed in academic journals are usually around 5000 words long and are reviewed by peers in the field before they are accepted for publication. For this reason, journal articles are considered the most credible and important form of academic publication. There are several types of journal articles: research articles which present a new study, theoretical articles which examine an issue without empirical research, and review articles which summarize current research in a field.

Books or Monographs

Some academics also publish books or monographs that allow them to explore a topic in more depth than in a journal article. Books are also considered credible academic sources.

Trade/Professional Publications

In order to reach a broader audience, some academics will publish in trade or professional journals related to their field. An editor reviews these articles, but they are not peer reviewed and are considered less important than articles in academic journals.

Grey Literature

Some academic writing is not formally published. This writing is called grey literature. For instance, academics often contribute to patent applications, technical reports, policy recommendations, and working papers, but these are not published formally.

Textbooks

Textbooks are teaching tools that summarize current thinking in a field. Textbooks are good for a broad overview of a topic, but they might not give a good sense of what knowledge is under debate in a field. Read the footnotes and endnotes in your textbook to find the primary sources of the information described. Reading these primary sources might give you a better sense of the current debates in a field.

Finding Academic Sources

Academics have written on most topics that you could consider, but they might not describe a phenomenon the same way that you do. This may lead you to falsely conclude that there is no research on this topic. For this reason, it is important to brainstorm words associated with your topic and stay alert to the words used by the academic sources that you do find. This will assist you in your search.

There are two important web sites on which you can find academic publications: Google Scholar and the university library web site.

Google Scholar

It is helpful to start your search on Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.ca/>). Type your search term into the field provided. If you are searching for an exact phrase, put it in quotation marks, as this can narrow your search considerably and improve your results.

Examine your list of results closely. The most useful information in the result list is the number of times an article or book has been cited. You can find this near the bottom of each citation entry. The number of citations is important because it is an indication of how influential a book or article is in a field. A high number of citations means that academics in the field have found this writing important. A low number of citations means either that the work is new (and hasn't had time yet to be cited) or that the work was not an important part of the academic conversation.

[book] [Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process](#)

[PDF] from [ayanetwork.com](#)

P Elbow - 1998 - [books.google.com](#)

A classic handbook for anyone who needs to write, **Writing With Power** speaks to everyone who has wrestled with words while seeking to gain power with them. Here, Peter Elbow emphasizes that the essential activities underlying good **writing** and the essential ...

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If the number of publications on a topic overwhelms you, you can narrow down your reading list by picking only the top cited works. Make a list of the works that you would like to read, and move over to your university library website to find them.

University Library

At the University of Alberta Libraries web site, you can find the location of books and download PDFs of academic articles.

You can find articles by looking for the name of the journal under the “Journals” menu option.

You can find books by typing the name of the book in the general search box. Most books are housed in the library buildings and you will have to physically retrieve them.

The library web site can also give you access to several databases of academic writing. These databases can give you more information about the relative importance of an article or book in its field. You can find more information about searching the library web site by asking a librarian or by taking their online tutorial here: <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/tutorials/>.

Using Academic Sources

Keeping records

Citing another author's work is an important part of academic writing. Citation gives academics credit for their work—the number of citations an academic's work receives is considered in their annual performance and promotion reviews. In addition, the punishment for plagiarism (copying work without giving credit) can be harsh. For these reasons, you must keep good records of what you have read and what ideas you have found in these works.

To help you to find any materials that you have collected and reviewed, you should develop a naming convention for your own files. For instance, you could name journal article PDFs as follows: *Doe (1999) Finding a good academic article.pdf*. You should have a similar naming convention for any notes that you take. You might find citation management software like EndNote, RefWorks or Papers useful.

Taking notes

Taking notes from what you read will help you to remember it and to organize your citations well. When you take notes, make sure to develop a system whereby you can tell if you have paraphrased or summarized an idea or if you have taken it verbatim from the text. This will help you to avoid inadvertent plagiarism. Your notes can include a summary of the text, quotations, key words, etc.