
MODULE 2: ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

LESSON 2: ADDITIONAL WAYS OF IDENTIFYING SCHOLARLY SOURCES

Title

Establishing Credibility

Module 2, Lesson 2

Additional Ways of Identifying Scholarly Sources

Introduction

In this lesson, you will continue learning how to identify scholarly source material for academic research. We'll go over:

- » How to recognize signs of academic endorsement
- » How to determine whether a source is current and relevant
- » How to differentiate between scholarly and popular sources

These concepts will help you make good decisions on what to include in your future work.

Academic endorsement is an important indicator of scholarship. We'll explore the signs of academic endorsement together, and you will learn how to recognize them on your own.

We'll also tackle the concepts of relevance and currency in scholarship. You'll learn why they are important, and how they are different.

Finally, you'll learn how to choose appropriate sources for your research projects. We'll show you some specific ways you can identify the differences between scholarly and popular resources.

Scan

No one can be expected to read everything while they're searching for resources, so it's important to practice the art of scanning. If there's an abstract, scan for key words: words or phrases that relate to your topic and provide clues about the content of the article. Pay attention to the A-B-C clues you see (authority, bias, and content). If there is no abstract, scan for author, publisher, and key words. Key words should not only relate to your topic, but also be of a scholarly nature.

Get into the habit of "talking to the text" as you scan, whether you're looking at a computer screen or a piece of paper. Highlight important words and phrases, record questions or

ideas that come up, and make notes about how this material might connect to other things you know.

If you were investigating the topic of high-stakes testing, what would you notice about the abstract and key words for this article? As you scan this abstract, you might highlight the key words “high-stakes testing,” which tell you that it relates to your topic. You might mark phrases like “qualitative metasynthesis” or “template analysis” with a question mark if you’re not sure what they mean. The use of these complex and specialized terms indicate that this is a scholarly source. Remember:

- » Abstract: If there’s an abstract, read it first, checking for key words and concepts.
- » Scan: Even if there isn’t an abstract, scan for key words and formal language structure.

References: Bibliography

Other signs of academic endorsement can be found by examining the work’s bibliography. Review your sources’ reference information to find signs of academic endorsement.

Look at the bibliography: is the article formulated from other scholarship? If there is no bibliography, that could be a sign that a source is *not* scholarly.

References: Citations

Check for citations within the text of the article. Have the authors backed up their statements with references to other scholarly sources?

You can see that this author is citing research that supports her statements. This tells you that her assertions are based on study in the field, and it indicates that other scholars share her views. This foundation is a good indicator of scholarly content. If the author provides no citations, it could be a sign that the source is *not* scholarly.

In many cases, you can also find out who is citing the source you’re looking at. If other scholars are using it as a source in their own research, that could be a sign of a well-respected scholarly source. This is called a “*cited by* search” or a “reverse citation search.” Many databases provide a link to this search from an article’s citation page.

In this case, a list of articles that have cited the one you’re looking at display when the link is clicked. This tells you that other scholars in the field consider this article a reliable source.

Currency

Once you’ve determined that a work is scholarly, it’s important that you make sure the sources you use are also **current** and **relevant**. When you assess the currency of a source, you’re asking, “How new is this information? Has anything changed since this was published?”

Here are a few clues that can help you decide whether a source is current.

- » Publication or revision date: does the source have one? If not, you really have no way to tell whether it's outdated. A scholarly source should always include a publication date.
- » How recent are the publication dates of the works cited in its bibliography? If a new article cites only articles from 20 years ago, consider whether it might be omitting more recent sources.
- » Has the information been revised, updated, or retracted? Is newer information available?
- » Also consider your topic: is information about it still changing or being discovered, such as in the fields of medicine or technology? If so, you may want to look for only very current sources. On the other hand, if you are writing about an event in ancient history, it may be fine to use older sources.

Relevance

The question of relevance is one that only you can answer: how useful is a source for your purpose?

- » Is it written at an appropriate level?
- » Is it too broad or too specific?
- » Does it answer a question or fill a need in your research?
- » Does it add something new?

Scholarly vs. Popular Sources

So far, we've looked at a variety of different academic journal excerpts from scholarly databases. But what about sources you find using Google or other search engines? You can use the principles you've learned to evaluate sources found online. Here's how: Look for publishing information.

Consider Slate. It's got an established publisher, a logo, and an author. What is it missing? Peer review. What about style? It's in color with an accessible and friendly tone and layout. Does that seem scholarly?

Look at Time Out From Testing. Their mission statement says they are "committed to a 'time-out' from excessive and high stakes exams." Can you detect bias in that statement?

Some types of information may appear credible but not scholarly. They may be written by thought leaders in the area you're researching, but the outlet for the article is not itself part of the scholarly record. In other cases, the author has an opinion to express or an agenda

to advance, so the information is biased. In certain cases, an article is actually created by a company's marketing department to get you to buy something. In this case, the piece is not created to forward an academic idea at all. On the web, you may encounter popular sources, and they should generally not be included in your scholarly research. Examples of popular sources include:

- » Sponsored pages, often called advertorials
- » Online magazines or blogs

Just because sources are popular doesn't mean they aren't accurate or well-written. They usually contain true information and are written in a way that interests and engages a general audience. But because they don't undergo the same rigorous peer review and editorial process as scholarly articles, they are not always suitable for establishing credibility in your research. They should generally be avoided for academic work.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is not considered a scholarly source for several reasons. Based on all the information we've covered, can you name a few?

- » It has no clear author, so there's no way to assess the author's credentials.
- » It doesn't have a publisher or editorial board, and it's not collected in a scholarly journal or database.
- » Though many editors collaborate on its records, there is no peer review or formal verification process.
- » There is no final or published version that can be cited, since many entries change daily or even hourly.
- » Its intent is to introduce a topic to a general audience, not to address academic or professional peers.

Next Steps

- » Next, we're going to move into a few practice activities related to what you've just learned.
- » Then, it's on to Lesson 3, Verifying Online Sources, where we'll talk further about evaluating sources you find online.
- » At the end of Module 2, you'll take an assessment of what you've learned in this lesson.