Popular and Scholarly Sources

One of the terms you will hear quite a lot from your college professors is scholarly sources. Most college professors will require scholarly sources as opposed to popular sources when assigning research papers and activities.

A scholarly source is very different from a popular source. You see popular sources all of the time. They are the magazines and newspapers that come to your house, or lie around at your dentist's office.

A popular source:

- is typically a magazine or newspaper, either online or in print
- usually have color photographs on the cover and throughout the publication
- include advertisements Popular sources usually include general news stories, like Time or Newsweek, or they may be focused around a specific topic, like decorating, hunting, cars, etc.

Articles in popular sources may have colorful, uncomplicated titles that broadly summarize the content of the article, such as "Ten Ways to Win Your Guy" or "Lose That Holiday Fat in Six Weeks".

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULAR SOURCES

Popular sources are usually written by journalists. They are written for a wide, general audience and include no bibliography or references. The articles are relatively short - usually 1 to 5 pages long.

So, when should you use a popular source?

Popular sources are good for finding general background information on a subject. They can also provide summaries of scholarly literature. They can provide an overview of the emotional impact of an event or provide information on current events.

SCHOLARLY SOURCES

Scholarly sources are materials like academic journals or conference papers. They are a lot more specialized and look different from popular publications.

Scholarly sources:

- Are less flashy than popular sources
- Have no advertising
- Contain minimal color printing or photographs
- Go through a stringent revision by other professionals in the field (peer-reviewed)
- Have designated volume and issue numbers
Articles in scholarly sources usually have lengthy titles with more complicated, technical jargon related to the professional field they address. An example title might be - "Determining of Threat Perceptions Affecting Direction of the U.S. Defense Expenditures by Using Ordinal Regression Models".... say WHAT?

CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOLARLY SOURCES

Scholarly sources are written by experts. They are intended for a professional, scholarly audience. They include abstracts, which is a summary of an article's main points and arguments. They will also include a bibliography or list of references. The articles in scholarly sources tend to be much longer - usually 5 to 30+ pages long. The articles will have technical or complicated vocabulary. In fact, some articles may not make much sense or may be very boring to someone who is not a professional in that field.

Scholarly sources are good for:

- Finding the most recent discoveries or analysis
- Learning in-depth details of research findings
- Getting information from professionals in the field

The information found in scholarly sources is accurate, up-to-date, and credible. That's three reasons why professors insist on their use in research.

Most scholarly sources may not sound familiar to you. A few include: The New England Journal of Medicine, American Journal of Sociology, and International Studies Quarterly.

Scholarly Sources and Electronic Databases

Electronic databases are a great place to locate scholarly sources. But remember, just because you found an article on a database does not make it a scholarly publication. Databases contain both popular AND scholarly articles.

Just like when you are looking for primary sources in a database, there is usually a search limiter provided that limits your search results to scholarly sources. This limiter is usually the option to select all results be peer-reviewed. Peer-reviewed articles have gone through a long editing and approval process by other experts in the field and are considered scholarly.

If there is a check box on the advanced search page for "peer-reviewed", checking it will limit your results to peer-reviewed (aka scholarly) sources.

Another way to limit your search results to scholarly articles in an electronic database is to search specific scholarly journals. You can do this by Googling your topic and adding scholarly journals to the search phrase. Write down the names of scholarly journals published in your specific topic area. When you search in the database, you can limit your search specifically to those journals. Keep in mind, the journal may not be archived by the database, but it never hurts to try.

Although it is not an electronic database, the search engine, Google, provides a tool to help you locate scholarly sources. The tool is called Google Scholar and it may provide you with some additional scholarly sources.
Watch the video below for more information about popular vs. scholarly sources.