Identifying Scholarly Resources: Clues for Books

These clues will go a long way towards assisting you in differentiating between books intended for the scholar and therefore, preferred when writing research papers, from trade publications or mass market publications that are intended for a general audience.

A. Book Reviews – a very good place to start when attempting to evaluate the scholarship of a book, especially if found in these resources:

1. Search Resources for College Libraries (RCL), which contains a core list of hand-selected print and electronic titles chosen by subject-expert editors and contributors. This database is used by academic librarians and faculty as a tool for identifying the best academic books for their respective libraries; you can do the same for your research papers.

2. Subject Specific Annotated Bibliographies can also prove useful in evaluating the quality of a work. To find these in the library, search the topic needed and the term “bibliography” in the Subject field AND this with the keyword “annotated”.

3. See WorldCat.org, which contains the catalogs of thousands of libraries around the world and has in excess of 179M records, as a kind of citation index by looking at the number of libraries that own the item. If many libraries own it, it’s more likely to be well respected in the field. Looking at who owns the item can also be a clue as to its respectability that is, if mostly academic libraries own the item, it’s probably more scholarly than if mostly public libraries own it.

4. Use Google Scholar to find scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, preprints, abstracts and technical reports from all areas of research. Articles are from a wide variety of academic publishers, professional societies, preprint repositories and universities, as well as scholarly articles available across the web.

5. Search a scholarly journal in the field.
   a. Search CHOICE (ISSN 0009-4978) published by the American Library Association, is a journal of current reviews of academic books, electronic media, and Internet resources of interest to those in higher education. Reviews are brief but thorough, providing information and recommendations written by selected experts in the subject. CHOICE is the basis for RCL (mentioned above) and available in ProQuest Research Library
   b. Search periodical indexes and databases for reviews in scholarly journals. (e.g. Academic Search, ATLAReligion with Serials, New Testament Abstracts, Old Testament Abstracts, Business Source, ERIC, etc.

6. For more details on finding reviews of books, articles, movies, Web products, etc., see the Research Guide “Finding Reviews”

B. Examine these elements of a published work:

1. Publisher - A good clue to a scholarly resource is its publisher. Books from publishers specializing in the field will tend to be of better quality textually then those that don’t.

2. An examination of the publisher’s Web site can be extremely valuable in discovering the type of material predominantly published by them. Look for “About” and a “Mission Statement”

3. Consider how long they’ve been in business? Do they provide services to academia?

4. Check the publisher’s organizational or denominational affiliation with Writer’s Market (R070.5), Literary Market Place (R070.509) and Christian Writer’s Market Guide (R070.52)

5. Books published by a university press will tend to be more academically sound than those published by trade publishers, especially if the institution has a good reputation in the field covered by the work. For example, if a book on education is published by Harvard Univ. Press, ask yourself, “What kind of reputation does Harvard have in its school of education?”—“Does it even have a school of education?” If so, it is probably trustworthy, all the more if their school of education has a very high reputation in itself.

C. You can find out the reputation of an institution and its programs with the help of these resources: Peterson’s College Guide, College Blue Book (available in the TMC library reference collection 378.73 C684m, 1999), U.S. News & World Report “Best Colleges” special edition, Forbes’ Best College Rankings, Rugg’s Recommendations.

NOTE: Just because a university is not listed in any of these resources does not necessarily mean it is not a reputable publisher. Remember this is a list of clues to aid in the evaluation of resources; they are not all requisite.
D. **Author/creator** - One means of identifying reputable author is to investigate his/her AUTHORITY with regard to the subject being published.

1. What are his/her credentials that give him/her authority to speak on the topic?
2. Is his/her educational background and/or life experience consistent with the topic of the work?
   a. To discover this you will need to get some background information on the author: biographical, educational, professional experience and affiliations.
   b. Biography Indexes can help with these. To find biographical tools, from the library catalog type the last name of the biographee (person about whom you wish to know) the term “biography” “all of these” in the Subject field.
3. It is also very likely the author will have a Web site, blog, social and/or professional networking account, etc. These can be helpful sources of background information on the author as can the Web site of the institution or organization where s/he is employed.
   a. Social networking sites: Facebook, Google+, Twitter, etc.
   b. Professional networking sites: LinkedIn, Viadeo, Xing, Company.com, etc.
4. Find out if s/he is recognized by other scholars in the field.
   a. This is can be ascertained by word-of-mouth; talking to scholars in the field; experience in research and in the field.
   b. You can do this also by tracking the references cited in each resource that you find. This involves the systematic application of the research strategy “using sources to find other sources”
   c. In academia it is a generally accepted principle that the more often a work is cited the more reputable it is. Therefore, knowing the frequency of works cited can help determine which ones are considered to be more valuable.
   d. Professional networking sites like those mentioned above can also help with this.

E. **Cited References and Bibliography** – Even more than a useful tool for evaluating the reliability of an author, cited references are an excellent indication of the scholarship of a work. Look for cited references or at least a bibliography in the work itself. Most books intended for the scholar contain citations and a bibliography, whereas books intended for a general audience do not.

1. Also, consider who is being cited; how frequently are the references cited elsewhere; has any one cited the work being evaluated and is this perhaps the primary source?
2. For works in the humanities, a good clue that you’ve found the primary source is when you keep getting referred to the same source over and over again. More about primary sources below
3. Works in the sciences will report on original research.
4. Many online indexes now provide links to cited references, some included “cited by” references and most will also provide “those who use this also used these…” The latter is not technically a cited reference, never-the-less is very helpful for finding more sources of information.

F. **Content** – examine these aspects of the work to assist in ascertaining the scholarship of a work:

1. Accuracy: how does the information compare to that of other works on the subject?
2. Biases: all authors are biased, but scholarly works tend to reflect the results of research in the field and not propagandize.
3. Preface, Introduction, Table of Contents, Conclusion and Index: most scholarly works will have several, if not all, of these components. Consider also how well the author lives up to his/her claims indicated in the preface, introduction and conclusion.
4. Audience appropriate: a scholarly work will be written to those with some knowledge of or ability to understand the topic under discussion.

G. **Graphics, Charts, Illustrations, etc.**: many scholarly works will have graphs, charts, illustrations, etc.
H. **Primary Sources:** the best scholarly research papers will contain as many of these as possible as part of their supporting documentation.

1. Original words – novels, poems, plays, speeches, interviews, letters, case studies, test data, findings from surveys, archaeological drawings, etc.
2. Original works – experiments, films, drawings, designs, paintings, music, sculptures, etc.

I. **Secondary Sources:** these are also very good sources to use in a scholarly paper

1. Works about somebody or about their work(s)
2. Criticisms, critiques, commentaries, reviews of primary sources
3. Sometimes a secondary source becomes the primary source when the topic of the paper is the secondary source (i.e. a critique or an evaluation of a Bible commentary)

I. **Tertiary Sources:** these are excellent places to start research on a topic, but are not considered acceptable as documentation in a scholarly research paper. Tertiary sources will provide background information, the broad context of a narrower topic, parameters of a topic and will increase one’s comprehension when reading secondary and primary sources on the topic. These will also identify expert authors, bibliographies and professional jargon which can be used to further one’s research – a perfect example of the premier research strategy, “use sources to find sources”.

1. A synthesis and explanation for a popular audience
2. Books and articles based on secondary sources
3. General and specialized encyclopedias including Wikipedia, textbooks and college term papers.

© Janet Tillman/The Master’s College, 2008-2013, permission is granted for non-profit educational use; any reproduction or modification should include this statement.

Last updated April, 2013