

Academic Literature

This study guide identifies the main types of academic literature you are expected to use in your studies and discusses their different characteristics and purposes. It offers guidance on the uses that each might have for your research, and which might best suit your purpose.

Related guide: [‘Effective Note Making’](#).

There is vast quantity of academic material available to you in various forms, and academic study requires you to use it confidently to research your subject for background understanding and for your assignments. Your task will be easier and quicker if you are familiar with the different types of academic literature, what they are intended to achieve and which is most likely to contain the kind of information you are looking for. Looking in the wrong type of source can waste much time and cause much frustration.

Books

Although you will no doubt be very familiar with books as a major resource for your studies, you may not be aware that there are different types or ‘genres’ of book in academic scholarship, just as there are in fiction, for example. You read a textbook for different purpose than you would read a book of conference proceedings, just as you would expect to gain a different kind of pleasure from reading a thriller novel and an autobiography. Below is a list of the different types of book to be found in the university library, with a description of their purpose and likely usefulness.

Textbooks

Textbooks are written for a student audience. As such, they rarely offer original research, but are a summary and synthesis of the main areas, theories, findings etc. within a subject. They aim to offer an objective, comprehensive and representative introduction to and overview of a large subject area. The information they offer will therefore be very general. Textbooks are worth reading as a comprehensive and reliable introduction to a subject without too much close detail to slow your reading. Some courses follow a particular one closely, other courses expect you to use them as a starting point for your own independent reading. When searching for books in the library catalogue, you may recognise when a book is a textbook by its general, broad title and possibly by the publisher, which may be one of the major specialist education publishers such as Blackwell, Pearson, or a University Press.

However, textbooks do date quite quickly, and although they do not aim to put forward a particular argument, a textbook will still reflect the main interests and perceptions of its author. You may therefore wish to compare accounts in different textbooks to be certain of a good overview, and make sure that you use the latest edition. You should also

remember that textbooks are second-hand accounts of established research. You should therefore supplement your understanding with a more in-depth reading of the original texts on which the textbook is based. If you are looking for detailed, specific information or different sides to a debate, then textbooks may only be useful as a way into a topic rather than a good basis for your assignment. Make sure that the textbook is of an appropriate level, and is not aimed at college or school students.

Subject-specific reference works

In addition to the general reference works such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, there are specialised dictionaries and encyclopaedias that are specific to your subject. The information they offer will be more detailed and more relevant to your work, especially when referencing basic information or discussing definitions. They will also be useful if you need an explanation of unusual or difficult terminology for your own understanding. Just like a normal dictionary or encyclopaedia, they contain short entries in alphabetical order so that you can quickly find the information you need. You can recognise this type of book by its title, and alphabetical arrangement of short articles. An example of this type of book is

Cuddon, J. A. 1999: *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (4th ed.) London: Penguin.

Scholarly monographs

A scholarly monographs are academic books which cover a single topic and is often by a single author. They are written primarily for a readership of academics (including postgraduates) but may contain information of interest to undergraduates. They are related to, but more academic and specialised than, the popular book (see below). They may offer useful material on a general topic, but as a major piece of original research, will usually be very specialised and detailed in their treatment of a possibly narrowly interpreted topic. Monographs are often the published version of a PhD, or a major long-term research project. They will develop a detailed argument over a series of chapters, so you should consider what kind of information you want (unless you are a postgraduate it is unlikely that you will need to follow the whole argument) and choose your reading strategy accordingly. Make sure that you are not using information out of context and misrepresenting its meaning. You could read the introduction to get a better idea of the book's aims and scope. Monographs may offer a good review of previous research in the field, and offer a useful bibliography. You might recognise when a book is a monograph if it has a single author (rarely more than one) and single subject. The title may however be misleading, and suggest a broader interpretation than is in fact the case. Many monographs give a title in two parts, divided by a colon (:). The first half may be more imaginative, and will capture your attention but not be much use in keyword searches. The second part, after the colon, will often describe the subject more precisely. An example is

Wayne, Stephen J., (2000): *The Road to the White House, 2000: the Politics of Presidential Elections*. Boston: Bedford /St Martins.

Books of essays

Many academic books are written by a number of authors, gathered together by an editor (who may or may not be one of the authors). In them, you will find chapters on different aspects of a theme. The chapters present original, cutting edge research and are intended to be read in the first instance by academics. The unifying theme of these collections varies. Some books are conference proceedings, that is, the published versions of papers given at a conference on a particular theme. Conference proceedings may also appear as a special edition of a journal. The range of articles represents the varied interests of the participants at that conference and the ways in which they interpreted the conference theme may vary considerably. They are likely to be very detailed and specific in their focus. For this reason, you will probably only find one or two of the articles in a book of Conference Proceedings useful for your purposes.

A second type of book of essays is based not on a theme, but on a single eminent scholar. At a later stage in their career, perhaps to mark an anniversary or retirement, a book of their collected works may be published. Alternatively, colleagues and former students may be asked to contribute to a *Festschrift* (German for 'book in honour of a person'), reflecting a theme in which that scholar was interested, or their contribution to scholarship. Again, the topics of these articles may vary considerably, and represent the author's specific research interests. You may find them too specialised for this reason if you are researching for an assignment on a very general topic.

You can recognise a book of essays as it will have an editor or editors as well as the authors of the chapters it contains. An example of a book of essays might be

Jones, Elspeth and Brown, Sally (eds). 2007: *Internationalising Higher Education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Handbooks and or readers

A handbook or reader is also a collection of essays, but usually with a more comprehensive and unified focus. They are intended to act as an advanced introduction to a field of study, providing essays, often by different academics, which give the main perspectives on a subject. The authors are usually selected as leaders in their field. The book may be a collection of articles on a key critical theory or topic, or a selection of the main texts by a single key critical thinker.

Handbooks and readers are a good way to gain an in-depth understanding of a topic, whether you read the whole book or one of the articles that is particularly relevant to your needs. They will help you to gain an overview of the key ideas within a topic, in a more detailed way than a textbook. The articles presented are more likely to be original research than the information found in a textbook, and may represent the author's individual perspective rather than attempting to give an objective and comprehensive coverage. Like a book of essays, you may recognise handbooks and readers because they have an editor as well as contributing authors. The library catalogue entry may list the essays contained in the book also. Examples of this sort of book are

Alexander, Patricia A. and Winne, Philip H. (eds). 2006: *Handbook of Educational Psychology* 2nd ed. London: Mahwah.

Rabinow, Paul (ed). 1991: *The Foucault Reader*. London: Penguin.

Books for a general audience ('popular' books)

Academics may write books for a general readership as well as their publications for their peers. These are intended to be read by non-specialists, so they are usually broader in their treatment of topics, and more accessible. They offer an easy to read, interesting introduction to a topic and may boost your enthusiasm for your subject. They may present an overview of a subject mixed with original new research.

However, they are usually not entirely suitable for academic assignments. They do not reference their sources as accurately (as a lay audience will not wish to read references or follow up the information in this depth) and may offer a simplified account of a complex subject. Their reputation among non-specialists may be unrepresentative or outdated, as the general public may not follow developments in research and therefore realise that what was once an important book is now outdated or that the academic's views are not regarded as a general consensus by his or her peers. Examples of authors who also write popular books are Richard Dawkins in Science and David Starkey in History. You may not recognise the difference until you open the book and see that the referencing is less frequent and obvious than a normal academic text. A non-academic publisher such as Penguin, and a cover and 'blurb' (text on the back cover describing the book) which are designed to appeal to the general public may also be clues.

Academic journals

An academic journal, also known as a periodical, is essentially an academic 'magazine' that comes out several times a year (usually monthly or quarterly), containing various articles, letters and reviews. The difference between an academic journal and any other sort of magazine is that its contents are 'peer reviewed'; that is, any article submitted for publication is reviewed by other experts in the field to ensure that it is of a suitable scholarly quality. Other types of journal, including practitioner or professional magazines, as well as those you can buy in the newsagents, have no such guarantee. When you are searching for material make sure you are using the appropriate kind of journal for your research.

At the end of the year, the copies are bound together by libraries into book form or a 'volume' of that year's papers (hence the need to identify journal articles by year, volume number, and part number) Many journals (but by no means all) are now published online in electronic as well as paper format. Electronic holdings may not be backdated to issues from the period before e-publishing was common. Each journal will usually represent a particular area of interest, indicated by the title, and will accept articles that fit with this profile. There are different types of journal article.

Book reviews

In journals, you will also find critical reviews of recently published academic books. These may be useful for your own critical reading or to keep up with the latest developments.

Letters

Science journals may also publish 'letters', a short article drawing attention to important research findings. These may offer a reference when discussing major discoveries in the history of science. An example is

Watson, J. D. and Crick, F. H. C. 1953: A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid. *Nature*, 171, 737-738.

Journal articles

It is difficult to identify many distinct subgenres of journal article. The types vary according to the subject discipline, and you may find case studies, thematic studies, theoretical articles, findings from experiments etc. In the Sciences and Social Sciences, for example, you may find the review article and the research report, but in the Arts and Humanities, this distinction is not as clear cut. It is worth assessing what kind of research project or research aim the article is describing, to know if it will fit your purpose.

Review articles

Review articles offer an overview of, and often critical comment on, a field or trend in research over a period of time. They are often quite lengthy. If such an article has been written about the subject you are interested in, it will be a very useful introduction to the field of research, identifying the main publications and developments. This kind of article is common to most disciplines.

Journal articles do however have a few general features. Many journal articles are very narrow in their focus; the journal article is by its length a suitable format in which to publish such detailed research. Many offer a case study rather than a general study, the results of which may or may not be more widely applicable to the field of knowledge. Journal articles are quicker to publish than books, so it is more likely that you will find something up-to-date. You may however find that many journal articles are too narrow for your purposes, that the findings are not transferable (for example, research done on a population in a different country or time period), or that their research agenda just does not fit your own needs. On the other hand, they may be very useful if their research agenda is similar to yours, or in modelling a research method you could use, or for building up part of a bigger picture. It is easier to tell quickly if a journal article will be useful. Their titles are usually more precise than books, and many will have an abstract at the beginning (also often published in the bibliographic databases of journal articles accessible via Metalib) that will describe the article's contents very precisely. Many journal articles in sciences and social sciences have a common structure, especially where they describe the results of a particular study or experiment: Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion, indicated by subheadings. This will help you find what you need more quickly.

Other Types of Literature

Reports

Universities are not the only institutions which carry out and publish quality research. Various agencies, including government agencies, charities and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) also publish the findings of their research in the form of reports. Partnerships between these organisations and universities may mean that some of the researchers are also academics. There is no mechanism for peer-review for these publications, unlike research of university origin; books and journal articles are reviewed by other academics before publication to ensure that they are publishable quality. Moreover, such research may be influenced by the interests of the organisation. You should read such material critically, as with any text you draw on in your work. There may be many situations in which you may need to use reports, and they can be a very useful source of information, and a primary source for many subjects such as social work, development or business. You will recognise them as such reports will be published by the government, NGO or charity themselves.

Professional literature

Certain subjects, such as Social Work, Allied Health Professions, Nursing or Education, may have their own professional literature, published by their professional bodies or by the relevant government department, concerning guidelines, codes of practice, regulations, government or institutional policies. You may need to draw on these in your written work as well as your future practice, so it is essential to be familiar with the main documents in your field. You will recognise the professional document if you are accessing it on the internet by its URL, which may end in .gov.uk or by the publisher, which may be the government (the Stationery Office, also abbreviated HMSO) or other professional body.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a [Learning Enhancement Tutor](#) in the [Student Support Service](#), as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- ✉ Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
- 🖱 Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our [website](#).

Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.

	<p>Scan the QR-code with a smartphone app for more resources.</p>	
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