Introduction to the PsycINFO Library Lab

Scholarly Communication

_Scholarly communication_ is the term used to refer to the system in which scholarly information is created, evaluated, disseminated, and preserved.

Scholars and scientists share their discoveries with each other in several ways. Informally, scientific colleagues may call or email each other about their latest research. But once the experiments have been done and the analysis carried out, a scientist needs to share this new information with a wider audience in a more formal manner. Other scientists can easily find this information and use it to help them design their own experiments, to put their own research in context, and to add to our knowledge of the world.

One of the most common ways for scientists to formally share their research is to publish a “journal article.” The journal article is a major part of the formal written record of the scientific process, and you’ve probably come across them before.

A typical scholarly, scientific journal article (aka “original research article” or “primary research article”) is peer reviewed, discusses the authors’ original research, offers thoughtful analysis of the results, and cites relevant papers from other authors that relate to the research.

A slightly different type of journal article (called a “review article”) will not report on original research, but will outline the current state of research in a particular field, citing the appropriate literature and connecting the various pieces of research together. Review articles are generally peer reviewed.

Both types of journal articles can be found in the library online and/or in print. The library lab will focus on different types of articles, what kind of information is available to you, and how you can find it as quickly and easily as possible. You will use the skills you learn in this session in future labs and in other classes.

Peer Review

Peer review is the formal process scholarly journals employ to ensure that a manuscript’s writing, methodology, arguments, and conclusions are sound. Peer review has long been a marker of quality that sets scholarly articles apart from popular articles.

Scientists rely on their colleagues, the reviewers, to make sure that good science is given a wide audience and that not-so-good science stays out of psychology journals. Because blogs, wikis, and personal websites don’t automatically have this expert filter, you have to do a lot more digging to determine if the information found there is reliable.
Of course, peer-review isn’t perfect. It isn’t good at filtering out deliberately fraudulent results. Because humans perform peer review, it is subject to the idiosyncrasies of individual scholars. For an excellent overview of the problems with peer review and how scientists are trying to resolve them, see the article, “Meet Science: ‘What is peer review’?” by Maggie Koerth-Baker.

When you’re searching for information on a research topic, you may also run across some other types of information. Shorter news articles (1-2 pages) may appear in some scientific and popular publications reporting on recent developments in a particular field, or reporting on a particular piece of research. These news articles are not peer reviewed, and are normally written by science journalists, not researchers. The news articles may be easier to read, but since they are normally one or two steps removed from the original research, a news article may not be the best source for your psychology paper or project. However, news articles can lead you to a piece of original research, and can help you easily stay informed about recent research developments.

If you conduct your searches online via Google or another public search engine, you may find journal articles, but you may also come across other scientific information that can take many forms. Wikis, blogs, and personal websites can often contain a lot of scientific information, but these resources are generally very far removed from the original research where the ideas were first developed. Each of these sources needs to be evaluated very carefully to determine if the information is credible, and these sources won’t be suitable for a research paper, although they may point you toward a primary research article that you can use.

There is a lot of great scientific information on the Web, but there is also a lot of bad science, pseudo-science, and non-science-pretending-to-be-science available and distinguishing them can be tricky. This is one of the reasons it is important to use the library’s subscription databases when doing research for your college classes. The library pays for curated coverage of the scientific literature, and, because you pay tuition, you have special access to this material.

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PsycINFO is a subscription database that helps you search for, identify, and obtain journal articles, book chapters, and dissertations in the field of psychology. In our library session, we’ll explore PsycINFO. You’ll learn how to search the psychological literature, learn how to refine your search topic, and get results that will be useful to you.