Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Other Periodicals

Journals and magazines are important sources for up-to-date information in all disciplines. With database access to large and diverse periodical collections, it is often difficult to distinguish between the various levels of scholarship found in the collections. There are five main categories for periodical literature: Scholarly, Trade/Professional, Substantive News/General Interest, Popular, and Sensational.

Webster's Third International Dictionary defines

scholarly as: 1) concerned with academic study, especially research, 2) exhibiting the methods and attitudes of a scholar, and 3) having the manner and appearance of a scholar.

One definition for trade is the people working in or associated with a business or industry.

Substantive is defined as having a solid base, being substantial.

Popular means fit for, or reflecting the taste and intelligence of, the people at large.

Sensational is defined as arousing or intending to arouse strong curiosity, interest or reaction.

Keeping these definitions in mind, and realizing that none of the lines drawn between types of periodicals can ever be totally clear cut, the general criteria are as follows.

SCHOLARLY
Scholarly journal articles often have an abstract, a descriptive summary of the article contents, before the main text of the article.

Scholarly journals generally have a sober, serious look. They often contain many graphs and charts but few glossy pages or exciting pictures.

Scholarly journals always cite their sources in the form of footnotes or bibliographies. These bibliographies are generally lengthy and cite other scholarly writings.

Articles are written by a scholar in the field or by someone who has done research in the field. The affiliations of the authors are listed, usually at the bottom of the first page or at the end of the article—universities, research institutions, think tanks, and the like.

The language of scholarly journals is that of the discipline covered. It assumes some scholarly background on the part of the reader.

The main purpose of a scholarly journal is to report on original research or experimentation in order to make such information available to the rest of the scholarly world.


TRADE OR PROFESSIONAL
Articles typically do not have abstracts, cite few sources, and tend to contain reports of research or news in the field, rather than original studies.

Trade/professional journals generally have glossy covers displaying an industrial or professional work environment or product. They tend to have color ads and illustrations.
The author of trade/professional journals are often a professional or specialist working in the particular field of interest.

Trade/professional journals are often written using the profession’s jargon, in language familiar to people in the profession or industry.

The purpose of trade/professional journals is to communicate trends, developments, product information, concepts and applications useful to those working in the profession or industry.

EXAMPLES: Advertising Age, Education Digest, Beverage World, Police Chef

**SUBSTANTIVE NEWS OR GENERAL INTEREST**

These periodicals may be quite attractive in appearance, although some are in newspaper format. Articles are often heavily illustrated, generally with photographs.

News and general interest periodicals sometimes cite sources, though more often do not.

Articles may be written by a member of the editorial staff, a scholar or a free lance writer.

The language of these publications is geared to any educated audience. There is no specialty assumed, only interest and a certain level of intelligence.

The main purpose of periodicals in this category is to provide information, in a general manner, to a broad audience of concerned citizens.


**POPULAR**

Popular periodicals come in many formats, although often somewhat slick and attractive in appearance. Lots of graphics (photographs, drawings, etc.).

These publications rarely, if ever, cite sources. Information published in such journals is often second or third hand and the original source is sometimes obscure.

Articles are usually very short, written in simple language and are designed to meet a minimal education level. There is generally little depth to the content of these articles.

The main purpose of popular periodicals is to entertain the reader, to sell products (their own or their advertisers), and/or to promote a viewpoint.

EXAMPLES: Parents, People Weekly, Sports Illustrated, Time

**SENSATIONAL**

Sensational periodicals come in a variety of styles, but often use a newspaper format.

Their language is elementary and occasionally inflammatory or sensational. They assume a certain gullibility in their audience.

The main purpose of sensational magazines seems to be to arouse curiosity and to cater to popular superstitions. They often do so with flashy headlines designed to astonish (e.g. Half-man Half-woman Makes Self Pregnant).

EXAMPLES: Globe, National Examiner, Star

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