

Where to Find Reference Materials about Your Research Topic

I give you many references about research methods. You will also need to find materials about specific topics. Use this information to make your search for those materials efficient and effective.

Most disciplines support several journals. You need to learn to use **research journals**. Many journals report research, but there are important differences between them in terms of the audience for which they are intended. A research journal means just what it says. The primary audience for the material is other researchers and advanced professionals. These are the journals that you will have to use throughout your graduate experience, and your employer after graduation will expect you to know these journals in your area of expertise and use them regularly. Relying on popular web sites is **not acceptable** in graduate school or in the professional work world. Even among research journals, the scholarly value of the material they contain varies. High caliber research journals are internationally recognized. They are always thoroughly peer reviewed. They report original research findings. In fact, most have a policy that they will not publish information that has been previously published somewhere else. They provide an in-depth description of the research design and methodology, including in-depth data analysis, and discuss the findings of the research in detail, usually including the theoretical contribution of the work. Both non-profit (professional societies mostly) and for-profit presses publish very good research journals. Most professional societies and for-profit publishers also produce journals for practitioners. They, too, are normally peer reviewed, but they are usually less scholarly than the high caliber research journals. They often focus on the recommendations that grow out of research, but do not provide a detailed description of how the research was conducted and the contribution of the research to new knowledge and theory. Other journals are aimed at a general public audience and you should not rely on these publications.

How can you identify a research journal? First, you can always consult with me or other faculty members in your area of interest to identify appropriate journals. However, you need to develop the ability to judge the quality of journals yourself. There are several characteristics that distinguish between different kinds of journals. First, in high caliber research journals, the majority of the articles will report original research results. Opinion pieces, review and the like will be of minor importance in the overall content of any given issue. Second, the articles will be for a sophisticated reader. You can see this by the use of technical terms, for example. Perhaps most telling, research reports in these journals carefully explain, in a detailed way, how the research was conducted. They let you know exactly what steps the researcher took to collect data. They include a very meticulous analysis of the results. Again, they explain exactly how the research analyzed the data. Third, the research reports focus on the research and what was learned -- **not** on recommendations for how to apply or use the findings. Finally, the description of the journal (somewhere near the very front) will give clear clues. Look for words like scholarly, the highest standards, and international interest. In my discipline, geography, the Association of American Geographers (AAG) publishes two journals. The first, the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, is a research journal. Here is how the AAG describes it:

“The Annals of the Association of American Geographers publishes original, timely, and innovative articles that advance knowledge in all facets of the discipline. Papers accepted for publication must meet the highest standards of scholarship, address significant research problems and issues, interest the broad readership of the journal, and be attuned to the sensibilities of a diverse scholarly audience.”

Lower caliber journals, on the other hand, do not aim their material at such a sophisticated audience. The audience might be the family practice doctor rather than the doctor at Shands; the school camp counselor rather than the professional whose work focuses on interventions for problematic adolescent behaviors; the field staff member in a community-based organization rather than the professional who develops, implements and evaluates programs for the organizations. Articles in the lower caliber journals often provide only a very brief description of how the research was conducted. The section about data analysis is usually not very lengthy or well developed and the results themselves are often reported in a summarized form. Often, there is little or no discussion of how the data were analyzed. These journals focus on recommendations for applying research findings, not on the research itself. They do not provide enough information for you to make an adequate evaluation of the degree to which their findings are justified or the degree to which they can be applied outside the context in which the study was conducted. *The Professional Geographer* is a fairly "low caliber" journal. Here is what AAG says: "[*The Professional Geographer*] publishes short articles on academic or applied geography, emphasizing empirical studies and methodologies, as well as book reviews. These features may range in content and approach from rigorously analytic to broadly philosophical or prescriptive." *National Geographic* is an example of a general interest journal in geography. It's audience is the general public, not professionals.