

Tips for Distinguishing Scholarly Books from Other Kinds of Books

Determining whether a book is “scholarly” is trickier than making the same judgment of a journal article. Books do not advertise themselves as “peer-reviewed,” although many manuscripts are subjected to a peer review process at the most reputable publishing houses.

If you can’t look at a book and tell if it is peer-reviewed, how can you use clues from the book to tell if it is scholarly? This handout gives some tips on evaluating the authority of a book based on several criteria. Together, they should help you form an idea of the reputation of an author, the content, and the publisher. If in doubt about whether it qualifies as a “scholarly” source, ask your professor’s opinion.

Author(s) authority: Is the expert really an expert?

From most to least scholarly:

- Holds advanced degree in the subject covered by the book or in a very closely related field.
- Trained investigative reporter writing about his/her investigation.
- Professional in the field writing about experiences in his/her own profession.
- Pundits and other opinion makers writing about their opinions.

Purpose of the book: What kind of information is the author trying to convey?

From most to least scholarly:

- Discuss and reflect on original empirical research.
- Provide an in depth examination of current events, such as Seymour Hersh’s book on Abu Ghraib.
- Discuss personal or professional experiences, such as Michael Connelly’s book about his life as a crime reporter.
- Profile individuals in a non-scholarly way, such as in the biography *Flags of our Fathers*.
- Argues personal political opinions, such as books by Ann Coulter or Al Franken.

Evidence cited by the author(s): What sources does the author use to draw conclusions?

From most to least scholarly:

- Original data collection and analysis / primary sources cited in footnotes and bibliographies.
- Secondary sources cited in footnotes and bibliographies.
- Interviews with persons close to event or research area cited within the text of the book. Sources may be indicated by phrases such as, “one source close to the Vice President reported...”
- Personal experience is described, such as *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich.
- Selected anecdotes from other peoples’ lives are described.
- Personal opinions and opinions of others form the basis of conclusions, such as David Limbaugh’s *Bankrupt*.

Language used by the author(s): How sophisticated is the writing?

From most to least scholarly:

- Uses the terminology of the discipline to discuss research. Targeted to an audience of scholars.
- Uses language common to the general public.
- Uses inflammatory language to arouse bias and prejudice in the reader, such as *The Global War on Your Guns*.

Publisher of the book: Who makes the book available to the public?

From most to least scholarly:

- A press that uses a double blind peer-review process before publication.
- University presses in general (Oxford, Kansas, or Cambridge) or other scholarly publishers (Sage or LFB).
- Popular publishers (Viking or Doubleday).
- Interest groups and ideological think tanks (Quality varies widely. Investigate the group and use other indicators for evaluation.)