

Why use academic journals?



Your tutors will no doubt have stressed to you the importance of using academic journals as a key source for your essays, research projects and dissertations, but why are these journals so important?

This handout will explain why journal literature is so important to your academic work.

What are academic journals?

Put simply, academic journals are academic magazines. Like magazines they are periodicals, meaning they are published periodically e.g. monthly or bi-monthly, and contain a series of articles in each published issue.

However, unlike the kind of popular magazines that you would buy on the high street, journals are **written by and for experts** in their chosen field. They are used as a **means for scholars and researchers to share their research** with the academic community.

Whilst there are many popular magazines on more 'serious' subjects e.g. New Scientist, The Economist, which can be excellent sources of background information, these are written with the lay person in mind and do not include the depth of coverage that an academic researcher would need. **For in-depth examination of a topic, academic journals should be your first choice.**

Primary research



Academic journals are the main **forum by which research is published**. Often the articles in academic journals will report in detail the finding of research studies. Whilst text books will frequently refer to key pieces of research, this will be secondary

commentary on the research rather than allowing you to read the actual findings of the study.

Important studies published in academic journals may be reported in more mainstream magazines such as New Scientist and The Economist or in newspapers, but the reports of the studies may greatly simplify the findings so that they are easily accessible to the lay person.

Focus



Each article published in a journal will also **explore a very narrow, specific topic in depth**. You can learn about a particular aspect of your topic in far greater detail than that which would be afforded in a text book or if it was reported in a popular magazine or newspaper.

Currency

The process of writing an academic book may take a long time, even years. While the information contained within it is clearly very useful, it may not be very up to date. As issues of journals are published more frequently **they are the best way of keeping up to date** with the latest research in your field. This is particularly pertinent if your topic is subject to frequent changes and developments.

Quality

Through peer review, academic journals can be seen as the 'gold standard' for academic research, ensuring a high level of quality and academic rigor in the articles that are published.

The process of getting published in an academic journal, therefore, is very different to how an article in a popular magazine or newspaper is published, where decisions on what to publish are solely at the discretion of an editor.

Decisions on whether to publish an author's article in an academic journal are made by a process called **peer review**. When an author submits an article to the journal the **article will be reviewed by other subject experts in the same field** to verify that its methodology is sound and that its conclusions are valid. The author may be asked to re-draft the article several times before it is of a suitable standard to be published.