Academic References Guideline

What distinguishes an academic reference from a “normal” reference, and how can we identify “academic” references when we come across them? This is a very common question that students ask, and this guide will provide a framework for evaluating references.

The first thing that must be noted is that a person’s reputation is initially irrelevant. This is particularly important in the fields of Theology, Ministry and Biblical Studies – prominent pastors and speakers are not always academics, and in fact rarely are. What really matters is the quality of their research, and to a lesser extent their qualifications. You should not, for example, be citing someone like Richard Dawkins (a biologist) for his understanding of theology, given he neither possesses a qualification nor publishes research in accepted academic journals in that field. In a similar vein, you should not be citing a biblical scholar in discussing astrophysics. What matters is the quality and relevance of the work, not necessarily its reputation.

However, as you move forward, you will see that particular scholars have attained a good reputation because of the quality and relevance of their work. These will be the scholars who are cited the most!

Secondly, we need to realise that academic sources are quite narrow in their expertise. This means that they are rarely written to suit a broad audience; they will use very specific language, terms, and definitions in making their argument, and will almost always engage with other academic scholarship to make their point. This therefore disqualifies dictionaries and many other reference works (though specific encyclopedias or compendiums may be relevant).

Thirdly, academic sources are often written to a select audience. They are not intended for public consumption – they are designed to be read by other scholars, to contribute to a scholarly discussion about a particular topic. This means that there are only a select few places to find academic sources; usually they are limited to journals (we will discuss this further below) and books. Even then, not all books are academic in nature.

So what then are some guidelines that we can follow? What distinguishes academic sources from other sources?

1. Peer review (journals and books)

One of the important processes of academic publication is the peer review process, and ultimately this is the key difference between academic and popular work. When an academic text is written, it usually cannot be published until it has been peer reviewed – this means that it is sent out to (normally) two experts in the field. These experts will offer their comments on the quality of the argument and research presented, and often suggestions for improvement. Finally, it will be reviewed by an editor for clarity. This means that academic works are reviewed multiple times before publication, meaning that they are of the highest quality possible. Other books are not usually as stringent.

A brief note here on libraries: you must note that the Alphacruces libraries are not solely tailored toward academic content, but also serve pastors and ministers who do not need that level of work.
This means that you cannot simply assume that any source you find in the library is “academic,” in fact there will often be sources that are not academic – they are instead in the libraries because they are helpful for those undertaking professional work.

2. Referencing

A key component of good research publication is referencing – used to demonstrate that the author of the publication has done due diligence in understanding the field that they are writing into, and showing whose ideas they are borrowing from or making use of to put forward their own argument. To use a mathematical analogy, this is “showing your working out,” demonstrating the process that was used to arrive at a conclusion.

Good academic work (and even non-academic work) will usually have some sort of referencing; this will of course vary between different referencing styles and different amounts, but generally speaking good academic work always contains a large number of references. If a piece of work does not contain many references, you should always look through it carefully and weigh it against the other guidelines on this list. It’s important to note that referencing within a piece of work should not be the sole criteria, as some diligent blog posts will also cite their sources.

3. Publishing Companies / Journals

Particular publishing companies and journals specialize in academic work and will reject any non-academic work. This can be very helpful – if you know that a journal is an academic one, you can then use multiple articles from it with great confidence. Similarly, if you know that a publisher is an academic one, you can be confident that it has been through the peer review process outlined earlier. You will become familiar over time with the different publishers and journals in each field, but you can (and should) always undertake a search if unsure.

Another helpful source can be journal rankings. These are externally produced evaluations of all of the journals in a particular field; the higher the ranking (A*, A, B, C from highest to lowest), the more stringent the peer evaluation process (meaning that work has to be of a very high standard to be accepted). Every field has a different set of journal rankings, so you should always undertake a search (for example, search for “business journal rankings”) and save the results so that you are able to check.


Business journal rankings: https://abdc.edu.au/research/abdc-journal-list/

Management journal rankings: https://harzing.com/resources/journal-quality-list

4. Reputation

As you undertake more research into a particular field, you will soon discover that particular academics are more prominent and have written extensively into particular fields. You will, for example, see that they are often referenced by multiple other scholars in their academic works. If a scholar is being referenced by others, it is often a good sign that their work is of particular quality; however, you should always go back to the original source rather than relying on someone else’s understanding. For example, if Newton’s article cites Isaacs, you should not simply draw out Newton’s citation of Isaacs into your essay, but should go to the original Isaacs source to ensure that Isaacs has not been misquoted or misrepresented.

Note that just because something is written by a prominent scholar, does not automatically mean that it is of a good quality or is appropriate. Scholars sometimes write non-academic work (such as magazine or newspaper articles), or sometimes are invited to publish without going through the usual stringent peer review checks. As always, you need to balance all of these guidelines together rather than allowing any of them to take precedence over the others.

5. Currency (recent publications)

As a rule of thumb, depending on your field, you should not be using sources that are more than ten years old. Of course, this varies wildly depending on the subject; this ten-year rule is particularly important for fields like psychology, science, business and so on, but less so for other fields like history, theology or biblical studies which are smaller and a little slower.

Having said that, you should always be careful when looking at older publications for a variety of reasons: often their research is outdated (they may have been proven wrong, or mistaken) or their premises have been challenge, or their questions may have been answered. Their methods might no longer be acceptable or in use, or their validity may be in question. As you are doubtless aware, a lot can change in just ten years, and scholarship is no different. For this reason, unless you are using an older source as a primary source (or a seminal source), you should always try to adhere to this ten year rule of thumb. If unsure, always consult your lecturer.

6. Citation metrics

One helpful rule is also to look at a publication’s citation metrics. A citation metric tells us how many times a piece of research was referenced by other research; the more citations, the more likely it is to be both reputable and useful (in other words, scholars have already applied the criteria listed here and found these documents worthwhile). The easiest way to do this is to head over to Google Scholar and search the article / text that you are reading or intending to use. When you find the article, you will often see a section listing “Cited by” followed by a number.

Of course, there are particular issues with using this metric alone. Fields like theology, for example, are much smaller than medicine or the earth sciences, and so naturally citation metrics will be substantially different. However, this is one of the most helpful measures you can use, particularly in determining whether a source is suitable for your essay.
7. Exceptions

There will always be exceptions to the guidelines, and it is important to acknowledge them. A few are listed below:

- Blogs: Some scholars maintain blogs where they discuss particular issues. Whilst blogs can be helpful, similar standards still apply – “reputation” is particularly important given that peer review does not happen with blogs.
- Theses: A few of our databases will also include results for Masters or PhD theses. These are almost always cutting-edge work, but be aware that they are not peer reviewed, instead being examined by two experts who simply give it a mark of approval. Not all theses are of a similarly high quality, so be judicious in how you use these.
- Newspaper Articles: these should only be used from a historical perspective.
- Websites: As with newspaper articles. Websites are particularly problematic as they generally do not adhere to any of the guidelines above. Anyone can put whatever they want on the internet, after all. Many websites which contain helpful sources have also been known to plagiarise others’ work, so be extraordinarily careful; it is generally best not to use websites at all unless the information cannot be found elsewhere.
- Government / Official Documents: These are almost always very helpful, for example census results or UN statistics. However, these will rarely set forth an actual argument, so you should only use them to support your own arguments rather than relying on them.
- Encyclopedias: These are intended as general sources of information, and are “aggregators” rather than producers of information. This means that you should not rely on them as they only provide a very broad overview; Wikipedia is a particular example that students should not rely on for detailed research.
- Dictionaries: These are generally unhelpful (see “encyclopedias” above); they tend to provide very broad definitions which are often not being used by scholars in the field (you will want to engage with specialist definitions as part of your own research work).

If you follow the above guidelines when you are trying to research a particular topic, you should almost always get high-quality results that will help you to put forward a good, strong argument. This applies no matter what field you are working in; so if you do a subject outside of your usual area of study, then you should of course spend some time familiarizing yourself with the field. This is one of the reasons why research for essays is often a lengthy process that can take days or even weeks!