

Scholars in Training: Solving the Mystery

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

This recipe was created to introduce first-year English and ESL composition students to the differences between scholarly and popular sources. As an end of the semester assignment, all students taking English and ESL composition courses are required to write a research paper that incorporates the use of various types of sources, including scholarly sources. Students typically have never read or seen a scholarly journal.

This recipe gives students hands-on experience in looking at, reading, and analyzing scholarly journals. It also gets them to compare the differences between types of sources. This activity can be done during a one-shot, but we typically used it during the second session of a two-session library instruction workshop.

NUMBERS SERVED

25 students

COOKING TIME

40 minutes

DIETARY GUIDELINES

This activity addresses some of the foundational aspects of information literacy, starting with recognizing definable elements within

an academic or popular resource. Students critically analyze how each resource may or may not support their writing assignment as well as vet each resource's authority and bias. The collaborative aspect of the analysis also brings in each group member's knowledge-set into play, allowing for natural conversation and a peer learning environment.

ACRL FRAMEWORKS ADDRESSED

- Authority is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Has Value
- Scholarship as Conversation

MAIN INGREDIENTS

- Manila envelopes with copies of the prompt, clues, and sources
- The room should have movable chairs to facilitate group collaboration
- Whiteboard / blackboard

MAIN COOKING TECHNIQUE

Small group work, hands-on activity, and class discussion

PREPARATION

Prepare 6 large manila envelopes with each containing two sources—a scholarly journal and either a magazine or newspaper—the prompt for the exercise, and a small envelope containing a clue with a detective

magnifying glass drawn on it. Materials are all pre-packed prior to dining time.

COOKING METHOD

Step 1 Activity Introduction (<5 minutes)

The head detective needs assistance from the rookie gumshoes to help solve the mystery of the unknown resources. Break up students into 6 groups of 3–5 and set timer for 10 minutes.

Step 2 (10 minutes)

Allow students to review the contents in the manila envelope that contains a scholarly and popular publication and the exercise prompt in Figure 1.

Each prompt has a different set of questions, so you can have groups look at different aspects of the sources, such as the subscription information, the publisher, and the background of the writers. You can also ask questions that have them think about why the publication exists, the use of advertisements, the design, and the reading level.

Students sometimes need encouragement to actually look at the inner contents of the sources provided. It's also fun to encourage them to try to read a paragraph from the scholarly source.

FIGURE 1. EXERCISE PROMPT



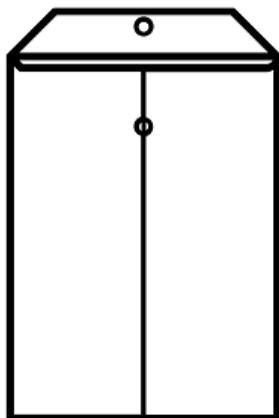
Dear student detectives,
Your librarian is suffering from a concussion after several encyclopedias fell on her head. She was given the job to organize these materials but has lost the ability to categorize and correctly identify these publications. As rookie gumshoes, she needs your help in solving and identifying the enclosed resources. She believes she has found the best and brightest students on campus to help her with her mission. Do not let her down! Good luck.

Instructions:

As a group, you have 10 minutes to look at the mystery items in the envelope and compare the two different sources you were given. Answer the following questions. If you need clues to help you identify the resource, you can open up the clue envelope. At the end of 10 minutes you will present your findings to the rest of the class.

Questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the articles in the publications?
2. How much research do you think goes into each article?
3. Who reads these sources?



A clue is available within an envelope if students need additional help or guidance. This is optional as some students may choose to do the exercise without it. Some enjoy the challenge of not using the clue.

Step 3 (15 minutes)

The instructor draws a line down the middle of the board and labels one Scholarly and one Popular. Once time is up, ask each group (one by one) what noticeable differences appeared to them between their sources. (If you have extra time, students can also write down the differences on the board during Step 2.)

As the instructor records their responses on the board, the instructor asks questions prompting answers for any additional features students may have missed.

Step 4 (5 minutes)

Tie in the importance of each kind of source when doing research for an academic-level paper and where these sources can be found. Also use this time for any Q&A that may result from the exercise.

ALLERGY WARNINGS

Students may come away from this exercise thinking popular sources are not quality materials for their research. It is important to clarify that there are very good uses for popular sources, but that they, as the researchers, need to develop their critical thinking skills to determine when to use popular sources. We also tell them that it's always important to use a mix of sources.

Clues



1. Look at the length of the articles in each source. Are there any charts, tables, graphs, or statistics? What type of subjects are these articles about?
2. Look at the citations (if there are any).
3. Think about what kind of knowledge you need to understand what the articles are talking about. Also look at whether or not the articles use a lot of specialized language or everyday language.

CHEF'S NOTE

We've used this activity in one-shots and multi-session library instruction sessions for first-year students and international students. This activity is a hit in every class we've tried it in—developmental classes, college-level, and ESL classes. This activity elicits excitement about scholarly sources because of their personal and educational interests in certain disciplines. Self-identification of “scholar in training” also increases students' awareness of academic expectations.