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As a college student, it is important to know the difference between scholarly, trade and popular periodicals. Often instructors will ask you to use a specific type of periodical to complete an assignment; usually the requirement is a scholarly or trade publication.

Periodicals are publications that are issued on a regular basis. Scholarly periodicals are known as journals, while trade or popular periodicals are called magazines.

Scholarly periodicals are considered such because their articles are written by experts within a specific field and the authors are often reporting on original research. Before they are published, most scholarly articles are evaluated for quality by other experts within the field in a process called "peer-review." As such, scholarly periodicals are also known as peer-reviewed, refereed, academic, or research journals.

Trade periodicals are also written for specific industries or fields. These articles are sometimes written by experts and other times by journalists. Because their purpose is to report in a timely manner on new trends or developments within a field, most trade articles do not go through a peer-review process. Trade publications are also known as industry or professional magazines.

Popular magazines are very different from scholarly journals or trade magazines. They are written by staff or journalists and do not go through a peer-review process. Their purpose is to inform or entertain, and they can typically be found on your grocery store shelves. Newspapers fall into this category.

It is often easier to distinguish scholarly journals from magazines when looking at their print versions. Journals usually are somber in appearance – black text on a white background with little color -- and rarely include flashy advertisements. Trade and popular magazines, on the other hand, usually have colorful and flashy covers as well as lots of photographs and advertisements.

If you are using the Library's article databases, many have features that allow you to limit your search results to scholarly journals, trade publications, and/or newspapers. Even with this feature, distinguishing between the different types of periodicals in the electronic environment can be difficult. Here are some characteristics of a scholarly article that can help. These articles typically contain:

- an abstract which summarizes the main points,
- methodology and results sections,
- charts and graphs,
- technical or specialized vocabulary,
- a bibliography or list of references at the end,
- and numerous pages.

Trade and popular magazine articles by comparison are typically only a few pages in length at most, written in less technical language, and even in the electronic environment, include pictures.
Trade magazines can be distinguished from popular magazines by looking at the content of the article and title of the publication. If the content does not have the attributes of a scholarly article, but its subject matter and title appear to be of interest to a specific field or industry, it’s probably a trade article.

If you still have questions about how to distinguish between scholarly journal articles and trade and popular magazine articles, ask a librarian for assistance.