

What is a journal? Teacher's notes

Overview

This exercise covers journals as a source of information, explaining how it is produced and arranged. It suggests criteria for students to decide how reliable the information is likely to be.

It may well provoke discussion on:

Whether newspaper stories tell the truth
The economics and process of publishing
Citations and footnotes¹
How knowledge grows

- *This exercise is intended for A/AS Level students*

Learning outcomes

At the end of this exercise the student should be able to:

- Describe how journals differ from books and magazines
- explain how their contents are arranged and produced
- identify criteria to decide how reliable an article is

Lesson plan

Content/Skills development	Teacher activity	Learner activity	Resources	Checking learning/ assessment opportunities
Discussion: what do we mean by a journal?	Gather ideas	Suggest ideas	Whiteboard	Level of contribution from students
What is a journal? Introduce factsheet	Introduce activity and discuss the technical terms in bold; look at arrangement		Factsheet	
Activity: look at an example journal online and find the four types of content		Look at examples on website	Computers/web	
Discussion: How reliable is an article?	Lead discussion	Offer opinions and evidence		Level of contribution from students
Criteria for reliability	Present criteria	Suggest others	Whiteboard	Level of contribution from students
Review	Journals as an information resource			

¹ This is covered in a separate exercise.

What is a journal?

Newspapers, magazines and books are written and published in different ways. This affects how reliable and current their information is. Journals are the main way that experts publish the results of their research, using a format that allows readers to check the validity of the work.

Definition of a journal

A **journal** is a type of publication that is issued over a long period as part of a series. Because the publications form a series, they are usually referred to by volume or issue number, and by date. It usually contains articles by many authors and is published by a society, university, or publishing company.

Journals vary widely in their audience and content: some are intended for the members of a society or for subscribers, some are on sale to the general public; some contain scholarly research, some news and gossip.

Journals are also sometimes described as periodicals, serial publications, and magazines. Newspapers are 'journals' but because of their size, layout, content and frequency they are often treated separately by libraries. The rules that journalists follow when writing stories emphasise new or current information ("What do we think now?" ; "Is this new drug a miracle cure?") rather than analysis of a wide range of past knowledge.

The main long-term value of journals lies in the main articles, but they may also contain editorial matter (contents, acknowledgements, information about the contributors), society notes (lists of members and officers, annual accounts, meeting reports), and advertisements.

How are articles written?

It is the editor's job to choose the articles to include in each issue. They usually rely on authors sending in articles likely to interest the journal's readers, rather than commissioning or inviting them. After deciding which to accept, the editor has the articles checked. This may be done by the editors themselves (**editorial review**) or by someone else who is an expert on the subject (**peer review**² or **refereeing**). The comments are then sent back to the author so that they can revise the text. The process may occur several times before the editor decides that the text is finished. Because of this checking, finished articles should contain reliable information.

² 'Peer' means 'person of equal status' so that a biologist's article will be reviewed by other biologists.

The articles are then sent to the printer, who typesets it as a page ready for printing. In the past this involved assembling each line of text on a page letter by letter, but it now is mainly done on computer using specialist software which produces text which is more readable than pages from word processors. Before all the copies are printed, the printer prints off a test version (known as a **galley** or **proof**³), which is sent to the editor and author for checking (**proofreading**); the author notes any printing mistakes, along with any other final changes they wish to make, and returns the proof.

The process of producing a finished printed article involves at least three different people: the editor, printer, and author. This should mean that there are few errors of fact, but there is also a lot of opportunity for minor errors of presentation. Authors who do not check the proofs carefully may appear in print saying things they would not agree with. When such errors occur, corrections may be printed in next issue or on a small slip of paper bound into the issue (an **erratum slip**).

Because others have some control over what the published article includes, authors with controversial views sometimes prefer to publish pamphlets themselves.

How are the contents of a journal organised?

Journals contain four main types of material:

- Articles, with a title and named author, usually self-contained
- Reviews, letters and other shorter contributions
- Editor's notes, introduction, society notices, often unsigned
- Additional material: covers, title page, and contents page

They may also contain advertisements, lists of books received, financial statements, and lists of subscribers. Often the additional material has no page numbers, or is numbered in Roman numerals. For ease of binding, large-format illustrations and photographs are sometimes inserted into the journal some distance from the article they relate to.

In the 19th century, there was a tradition that the authors of reviews and other short articles should be unnamed, or identified by initials or a nickname only.

Scholarly articles will cite their sources, either in the text, in footnotes, or at the end of the article. These references allow readers to go back to the source to confirm that the article's interpretation is correct.

How reliable is the information?

There is no simple test to decide whether a piece of text is reliable, but readers should use a combination of internal and external evidence when evaluating a source.

³ 'Proof' here meaning 'test' rather than 'evidence', as in the phrase 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating.'

Internal evidence includes:

Authorship	Is the author well-known or -qualified? Are they affiliated to an respected institution?
Structure	Is the article set out in a clear and organised way?
Sources	Are the sources listed? Do they include the main works on a topic? Do they include recently-published work?
Acknowledgements	Does the author mention other experts they have consulted?

External evidence includes:

Journal title	Is the publication respected as an important source with high editorial values?
Citations	Is this article referred to by other authors?

Unfortunately, even after applying these tests, the information may still be unreliable. It may have been thought true at the time, but has since been shown to be false (see, for example, the miasmatic theory of disease). In general, articles by establishment figures will promote orthodox views. It is common to give too much respect to prominent authors whose views on any particular topic may have been ill-informed or incorrect (this is the logical fallacy called the ‘argument from authority’: “it must be true because somebody important says so”).

The best test for reliability is to become a **critical reader**. This does not mean disagreeing with the author: it means carefully reading the article, checking the sources where possible, and trying to think of alternative explanations. This is particularly important if a topic is controversial, where there will often be authors on both sides of a debate, and the reader must judge for themselves which is correct.

Further reading

http://www.york.ac.uk/library/elibrary/htmltutorials/tutorial002_01.htm