

Grey Literature

Grey literature is material that has the appearance of a scholarly research report or study, but is published by an interest group, think tank, for-profit research organization, government commission, or one of several other influential and ideologically driven organizations. It also includes articles written by scholars that have not yet been published in academic journals.

Author, Audience, Purpose

Authors vary considerably. Many are experts and scholars who may or may not be paid for their contributions. Others include paid consultants, government officials/appointees, lobbyists, or organization representatives.

The intended audience varies but often includes policy makers, government contractors, and scholars/experts.

The advancement of knowledge about a topic is usually one of several considerations but in some cases may be subordinated to ideological, political, or institutional objectives.

Reliability

Some grey literature sources go through a peer review process, but the quality of this process is sometimes diminished when those reviewing articles have homogeneous interests. Others have an editorial board and/or official process of approval, but in these cases findings which go against the interests of the funding/publishing organization may be suppressed.

Examples

- Reports and studies published by the Brookings Institute, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, RAND Corporation, Council on Foreign Relations, Cato Institute, ACLU, etc.
- Government reports on original research and reviews of scholarly literature
- Pre-print manuscripts of ongoing scholarly research
- Reports published by intergovernmental bodies like the UN, WTO, World Bank, IMF, or IPCC

Uses in the Research Process

Grey literature sources are often well documented with a literature review and extensive context. Material published by think tanks, NGOs, and government commissions are of high quality, but still require a vigilant, critical eye. Often it represents a single perspective that is narrowly circumscribed by an institutional context or by an ideological orientation. Any evidence drawn from such sources will need to be put into context by discussing the stake that the funding/publishing organization has in the findings. Pre-print manuscripts may be very similar to articles from scholarly journals, but keep in mind that these articles have not been peer reviewed yet.

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Tips for Identifying Grey Literature

First Page

- Many grey literature sources include a cover page that identifies the organization sponsoring the report or the entity to which the report was submitted.

Genre

- Many grey literature sources will follow the genre conventions of scholarly literature.

Language

- These sources are often written in language specific to scholars and/or professionals in the field.

Editorial Oversight

- The kind of review, editorial oversight, or report approval process can usually be determined from indicators in the report itself, on the issuing agency's or organization's website, or from *Google* searches. This information is needed to contextualize the information in the report.

How do I Find Grey Literature

Grey literature frequently appears in *Google* and *Google Scholar* searches. It can also be found on the websites of sponsoring organizations or government agencies. It might be mentioned in popular press articles. Particularly high-profile reports of this nature will be cited in some scholarly literature.