

Grey Literature

Grey literature has the appearance of a scholarly research report or study, but it is published by an interest group, think tank, research organization, government, or another influential and ideologically driven organization. It also includes works written by scholars that have not yet been published as a journal article or book.

Author, Audience, and 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 and appointees, lobbyists, or organization representatives.

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

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

Examples:

- Reports and studies by groups like the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, ACLU, etc.
- Government reports
- Pre-print manuscripts of ongoing scholarly research
- Reports by intergovernmental bodies like the UN or World Bank

Reliability

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

Uses in the Research Process

Grey literature sources are often well documented with a literature review and extensive content. Material published by think tanks, NGOs, and government commissions are of high quality, but still require a vigilant, critical eye. Often, grey literature 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 or 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manuscripts may be very similar to articles from scholarly journals, but keep in mind that these articles have not been peer reviewed yet.

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 internet searches. This information is needed to contextualize the information in the report.

How to Find Grey Literature

Grey literature frequently appears in internet searches. It can also be found on the websites of sponsoring organizations or government agencies. Some library databases include grey literature. You may locate them by using document or publication type filters.

