

## Using Grey Literature

### *Or Amplifying Marginalized Voices*

In many fields, peer-reviewed literature is touted as the single best place to get information, often to the exclusion of all else. However, it's important to be aware that peer-reviewed literature can't do everything and that other sources of information may be necessary.

What Peer-Reviewed Articles Don't Do:

1. Often offer a local or regional perspective on an issue, or reflect local practices and programs.
2. Provide robust industry information.
3. Publish articles with negative results (i.e. articles with results that failed to disprove the null hypothesis). Such articles are important to the big picture and not publishing them results in a significant bias in the literature.
4. Show / provide raw data, which means that they are also not a great place to get information about major surveys like the census or other national polls.
5. Have *really* current content, as it takes years to publish something.
6. Represent diverse issues well, especially historically. Research with minority or underprivileged populations tends to be underrepresented in the peer-reviewed literature, and what research there can be culturally insensitive.

To balance out the biases of the formal, peer-reviewed literature, it's sometimes – even often – necessary to delve into what we call *grey* literature.

What Grey Lit is and Why We Need it:

Grey literature refers to information that was produced and reported by an organization that is not primarily a publisher. It's a vast heading that includes such things as reports, working papers, conference proceedings, and government documents.

Grey literature can't replace the peer-reviewed literature in any single case (for reasons I'll explain shortly), but it complements it in a number of important ways. For example, grey literature can:

1. Be produced more quickly than formally published literature, making it an excellent place to get the most up to date research on a topic.
2. Offer better representation to marginalized populations both locally and around the world. It often provides a voice to groups that are not well represented in formal publishing channels, and individuals who are not affiliated with academic institutions. This can be particularly important in fields such as social justice, where the perspectives

and experiences of marginalized populations are essential for understanding the issues at hand.

3. Provide a platform for information that simply doesn't 'fit' within the publishing templates and guidelines of books or articles. Industry reports, technical reports, survey and census data, government documents, and research or reports produced by major organizations like the WHO and the UN are all valid and valuable information sources that don't necessarily 'fit' the traditional formats of books and articles.

However, just like any other type of information, grey literature has its weaknesses.

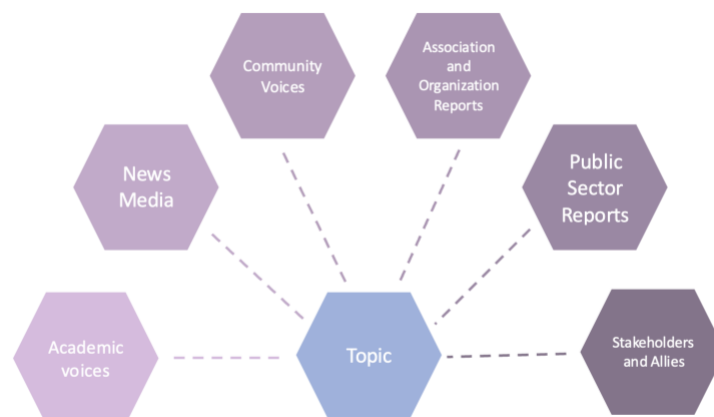
#### The Downside to Grey Lit:

1. Because it isn't peer-reviewed, and sometimes not reviewed or edited at all, the quality and accuracy of information it contains can vary widely. You have to be much more cautious of grey literature sources than you do of research disseminated through more formal processes.
2. Grey literature is also *notoriously* difficult to retrieve, as it isn't widely disseminated or easily accessible through traditional information sharing platforms like library catalogues or databases.

#### Finding Grey Lit – It's not always easy...

When you search for grey literature, there is no *one place* or even *one kind of place* to find it. Instead, you need to employ a series of different approaches based on the research question being asked and the type of information needed.

Below is a nice, generic framework that was developed by a librarian at the University of Waterloo and adapted by librarians at U of T. When you're looking at doing research on a topic – particularly one that isn't well represented in the peer-reviewed literature – consider each of these broad categories in your search planning. Taking a few minutes to brainstorm the kinds of places and groups that might create or hold the information you need is deeply valuable when considering a dive into the grey literature.



*Academic voices* includes the more traditional publishing avenues like books and peer reviewed articles (which are not grey literature), but also includes things like conference proceedings and dissertations (which are).

*News media* includes things like print news, news radio and television, and some podcasts. These are also not really considered grey literature, but since they often appear when doing grey lit searching and can offer the same kinds of value, they're worth mentioning here.

*Community voices* could come from some social media accounts and platforms, forums, and blogs. While few public forums are considered acceptable for most applications in academic work, there is some leeway for its use in amplifying marginalized voices that might otherwise go unheard. You wouldn't want to use facts shared through such forums, but you could take quotes to exemplify the experiences of the people voicing them, or make use of any links or connections the authors may share.

*Association and organization reports* are more or less exactly what they sound like they are.

*Public sector reports* include things like government documents and social services documents.

*Stakeholders and allies* includes anything produced by anyone else who might have a stake or interest in the topic you are researching, *whether their stake is supportive or exploitative*, although the latter should definitely be taken with a grain or two of salt.

Once you've gone through this brainstorming process and you have a good idea what you want to look for, there are a number of tools and techniques you can use to find them.

Use Google:

Grey lit searching is one of the few circumstances in my career as a librarian that I will actually recommend Google as a place to search for information, and I do it because *a lot* of grey literature never ends up getting filed anywhere except on small organizational websites

For instance, if you're interested in homelessness in Fredericton, a Google search might bring up reports about local homelessness rates, housing supports and programs. It would be rare for such small regional details to be found in the published academic literature.

That being said, if you're going to use Google, it's important to do so very deliberately and take advantage of what few controls you have over the results it brings back. [Google's advanced searching page](#) is the easiest way to do this.

## Advanced Search

Find pages with...		To do this in the search box
all these words:	<input type="text"/>	Type the important words: tricolor rat terrier
this exact word or phrase:	<input type="text"/>	Put exact words in quotes: "rat terrier"
any of these words:	<input type="text"/>	Type OR between all the words you want: miniature OR standard
none of these words:	<input type="text"/>	Put a minus sign just before words you don't want: -rodent, -"Jack Russell"
numbers ranging from:	<input type="text"/> to <input type="text"/>	Put 2 periods between the numbers and add a unit of measure: 10..35 lb, \$300..\$500, 2010..2011

---

Then narrow your results by...

language:	<input type="text" value="any language"/>	Find pages in the language you select.
region:	<input type="text" value="any region"/>	Find pages published in a particular region.
last update:	<input type="text" value="anytime"/>	Find pages updated within the time you specify.
site or domain:	<input type="text"/>	Search one site (like wikipedia.org) or limit your results to a domain like .edu, .org or .gov
terms appearing:	<input type="text" value="anywhere in the page"/>	Search for terms in the whole page, page title, or web address, or links to the page you're looking for.
SafeSearch:	<input type="text" value="Show explicit results"/>	Tell SafeSearch whether to filter sexually explicit content.
file type:	<input type="text" value="any format"/>	Find pages in the format you prefer.
usage rights:	<input type="text" value="not filtered by license"/>	Find pages you are free to use yourself.

### A Few Things to Take Special Note of:

1. Search word controls (top four lines) allow you to control the way google interprets the words you search, allowing you to indicate which words *must* be included and which *phrases* are important, to offer up synonyms, and to block certain results. All of these can be useful in different situations.
2. Google's advanced search also allows you to search specific websites or URLs. If you know that the kind of information you're looking for is most likely to be found on a specific website – or even a few specific websites – you can use Google to search *just those websites*. A few of the domains that I recommend are:

canada.ca / gc.ca  
statcan.gc.ca  
gnb.ca  
.gov  
who.int

For more sites, or for sites specific to your disciplines, you can check out your disciplinary research guide, which can be found under the “research by subject” section of the main UNB Libraries website.

3. Lastly, it's possible to limit your Google searches to only bring back certain filetypes, like PDFs, PPTs, Excel or CSV files, etc. I personally find limiting to PDFs particularly helpful because most formal reports and documents that are intended to be shared and read by the public will end up in that format. It also really helps to narrow down your results.

## Other Options:

*Proquest's dissertations and theses* is – unsurprisingly – a great place to find dissertations and theses, particularly ones published in Canada and the United States.

*CBCA complete* is a business database that specializes in Canadian content and has a lot of different kinds of grey literature, like trade journals, blogs, podcasts and wire feeds. I like it as a broadly good place to find Canadian grey literature in an information landscape that otherwise tends to be dominated by our neighbours to the south.

*Statista* is a database that specializes in data sets from a lot of different sources around the world, instead of limiting yourself to Canadian ones the way you would if you were searching statcan.

*Conference proceedings* are particularly important sources of information, because they can tell you *what research didn't work out*, where peer-reviewed research mostly only tells you *what did*. **This can help you to avoid pursuing dead end research and information, and can also help to offer a more complete perspective on a topic.** Conference proceedings *can* be found in normal academic databases, are *more likely* to be found in large indexing tools like Scopus and Google Scholar, and *are best* found on their native conference or association websites. Proceedings for individual conferences can also sometimes be found by searching the conference hashtag, as many conferences have active twitter feeds that feature speakers and their papers.

*Industry databases* like Mergent and D&B are a great way to get information about specific businesses and analytics.

*Institutional repositories* are basically databases hosted at research institutions to store and share their own work. These can be good sources for a single institution's theses, dissertations and conference proceedings.

## Evaluating the Quality of a Grey Lit Source:

Now that I've thoroughly touted the importance and value of grey literature, I want to return to a point I made early on that the biggest downside to grey lit is that it varies widely in quality and reliability. Because there is no formal editing or review process for most of the grey literature that's created, it's up to users to make such judgements.

There are lots of methods proposed for making those judgements, both formal and informal, that can be looked up online. Broadly speaking though, the kinds of things you'll want to consider are:

1. The author and whether they have the education or experience needed to speak authoritatively on the topic.
2. Whether the information is current and, if not, whether it is too old to accurately reflect current perspectives.
3. Whether there are references or citations and the quality of those sources if they are provided.
4. What the motivations of the author or creator are. Are they being paid? Do they benefit in some way from persuading you of something? Are they advantaged simply by your readership and could that be influencing what and how they write? *AND...*
5. Whether you've found or read any other reliable sources that corroborate the information being shared and how reliable those sources were.

Failing any one – or more – of these tests doesn't mean that the source can't be used, but it does influence how it should be used and the weight it should be given. For instance, someone doesn't need to be well educated to share their personal experiences, but when considering the weight of those experiences on a broader community and issue it's necessary to remember that they are anecdotes, not evidence. Quotes for salience and context are appropriate and valuable, but a higher threshold of evidence is still needed for more substantial conclusions and decision making.