This is a tutorial from the librarians at Lone Star College. The purpose of this tutorial is to teach users the differences between scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers.

While you are in college, professors will give you research assignments. Your professors will often tell you that you should use scholarly journal articles as sources for those research assignments.

Scholarly journals are sometimes called academic journals or peer-reviewed journals. Practically speaking, for most college students, these terms are synonymous.

But scholarly journals are different from magazines and newspapers. Scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers are all periodicals, which means that they are published periodically instead of all at once, as books usually are. Newspapers are commonly published every day or every week. Magazine issues may appear every week or month. Scholarly journals usually (but not always) are published every three months.

Scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers are also usually—at least originally—published on paper. You can access many articles from them through the library’s databases.

So these publications have a lot in common. But there is an essential difference. Scholarly journals are different from magazines and newspapers in the way that they are edited.

To repeat, this is the core distinction: scholarly journals are usually edited according to a more rigorous process called peer review.

Let’s say that you are a freelance writer attached to a popular interest magazine. You’ve got an idea for a fun article. So you write it up and send it to your editor. Your editor probably has a bachelor’s degree in
journalism or a background in writing. The editor will check your spelling, grammar, and style. A fact checker, who is a generalist rather than a specialist, may do some verification of your claims. Then (assuming that the article is interesting), your article will be published.

Now let’s say that instead, you’ve written an article for a scholarly journal. You send your manuscript to the editor of that journal. The editor makes a few copies of your manuscript and removes your name from those copies. Then the editor sends those copies to recognized experts or scholars in the field about which you are writing.

Those experts carefully review and critique your article. They send their critiques back to the editor. The editor takes those critiques and removes the reviewers’ names from them, and sends those critiques back to you, the author of the manuscript.

The reviewers don’t know who wrote the article. The author doesn’t know who reviewed the manuscript. This is called double-blind review. The purpose of this process is to remove personal biases and favoritism from the peer review process.

Now you, the author of the manuscript, carefully revises the text, taking into account the critiques by the reviewers who are scholars in that field. You can then resubmit the manuscript to the journal.

At this point, the editor may decide to publish the revised manuscript. Or the editor may or decide to instead begin the editorial process all over again, sending out copies of the revised manuscript to more scholars.

This entire editorial process is commonly called peer review. It’s possible to write and publish a magazine article in less than a week. But it can take years to publish a single journal article because the editorial control is so much tighter.
So when your professors tell you to use scholarly journal articles for a research assignment, they’re doing so because the editorial control is much more rigorous than that which is usually present in magazines. The reviewers, as specialized scholars, ensure that the quality of the work reflects that of a peer of equal scholarship.

Scholarly journals aren’t always right. Incorrect information, faulty conclusions, and outright fraud have been published in the pages of scholarly journals. But because of the tighter editorial control of the peer review process, scholarly journals are less likely to be wrong.