Scholarly articles. Academic articles. Peer reviewed articles. You may have heard these terms used by your professor, but what do they mean? Essentially, these are all different ways of describing the same thing: research articles that have been published in scholarly journals. But what is a research article, and how does it get published in a scholarly journal?

First of all, the article reports a scholar’s research practice and findings. And, it’s written with an audience of other researchers in mind. Finally, in order to be published and accepted by the scholarly community, the article must pass several quality tests. The most important of these tests is called peer review.

We can get a better understanding of the role of peer review if we look at the academic publishing process as a whole. Let’s imagine a researcher who wants to share a discovery with the academic community. To do this, he writes a draft article describing his research and findings and submits it for publication in a scholarly journal.

Here’s where the article has to pass its first test: The journal’s editor reads over the article to decide whether it’s a good fit for her journal. If it is, she sends copies of the article to a group of experts to evaluate the article’s quality, in a process called “peer review”. This is the article’s second, and most important, test. These experts are the author’s “peers”, since they are working in the same research area. And since they are making a judgment about the article, they’re sometimes called referees -- so peer reviewed articles are sometimes called “refereed articles”.

Each reviewer evaluates the article by asking questions to judge the quality and significance of the research. Questions like, "What is this research about?" "Is it interesting?" "Is it important?" "Is the methodology sound?" "Are the conclusions logical?" and "Are the findings original?"

Based on the answers to these questions, the reviewers decide whether the article is worthy of publication in the journal. They then make a recommendation to the editor -- either approve the article for publication, or reject it. Even if they recommend publishing the article, they usually expect the author to make revisions. The editor, however, makes the final determination whether the article should be approved, rejected, or revised. Rejection is common, though. The most prestigious journals are very selective about the articles they publish, so they tend to have high rejection rates: some journals reject more than 90% of the submissions they receive.

From the time the researcher first submits his draft article to the time it is finally published, several months - or years - may have elapsed. Once the journal is published, it is made available to subscribers, which are usually university libraries, because individual subscriptions are very expensive, often hundreds or thousands of dollars a year. By the way, like all established systems, the peer review system has its critics, and scholars continue to think about how the peer review process might be improved.
The library has tools to help you find peer reviewed research. If you want to know more about the peer review process or need help finding peer reviewed articles, ask a librarian for help!