How to identify seminal literature in your field

A seminal work is one that contributes to the development of later works. These works present important research in their field that inspired further research. You can tell if a work has contributed to later research by checking the bibliographies of articles you find.

What articles are cited by other articles over and over again? You can identify how important a work is by looking at its citation count. Search for the article in question Google Scholar then take a look at the number next to the "Times Cited" or "Cited by" links. The larger the number, the more times it has been cited by others. Papers that have been cited hundreds or even thousands or times are generally considered seminal works.

Another way to search for seminal works in your subject or topic area is by using Web of Science, a database that the WSU Vancouver Library subscribes to and that can be found in our A-Z list of databases.

To use Web of Science to locate seminal literature in your topic area, follow these steps:

Put your topic in the topic search box. You can use asterisks to truncate words. Keep in mind that "AND" is automatically inserted between each term. The results are automatically sorted by "Publication Date – newest to oldest." For seminal research, switch to sort by "Times Cited – highest to lowest." The top result here was cited 52 times, and you can click to see the articles which cited it. These newer articles build off of the seminal work and can be helpful to your research as they represent newer findings.

- Highly cited papers are likely to be older than more recent papers — there has been more time for researchers to read and use them in newer research.

- Tip: Use the Publication Years search refinement option available along the left-hand side of the page to filter your search results to more recent dates, and to see the papers that have had the most influence in recent years.