

AI Found the Sources. Did It Find the Literature?

Why verifying citations is only one part of responsible AI-assisted research.

AI research tools can make scholarly discovery faster and more conversational. They can also influence which scholarship becomes visible before a researcher begins evaluating an individual source.

THE KEY IDEA

A real citation does not automatically mean an adequate literature search.

A researcher can receive accurate, peer-reviewed sources and still have an incomplete or unbalanced evidence set if important scholarship was omitted, the question was reframed, or the system emphasized only part of the scholarly conversation.

Three levels of verification

01

Source Verification

Does the publication exist? Is it the correct version? Does it actually support the claim the AI made about it?

02

Search Verification

How did the system interpret the question? What did it search, rank, select, or exclude?

03

Evidence-Set Adequacy

Is the literature you have sufficient and appropriately representative for the claim, assignment, review, or research question?

WHAT IS CHANGING

AI increasingly sits between the researcher and the scholarly record

Traditional searching usually makes the researcher's query and the resulting list of sources relatively visible. Newer AI-mediated discovery systems can do more work before the researcher sees the results: they may interpret a natural-language question, identify concepts, retrieve candidate literature, rank or select papers, and summarize why particular sources appear useful.

For example, Google's Scholar Labs identifies topics, aspects, and relationships within a research question, searches Google Scholar, scans results, and surfaces papers intended to help answer the overall question. This can be useful—but it means that scholarly selection decisions may occur upstream of individual-source evaluation.

The responsible conclusion is not “AI search is bad.”

Useful does not mean complete.

A 2025 systematic review found substantial error and omission rates when generative AI was used for evidence-synthesis tasks, especially searching, and concluded that human involvement and oversight remain necessary.

Different systems can emphasize different scholarship.

A 2026 study comparing GenAI literature-search tools with traditional databases found greater geographic diversity in the GenAI results in that sample, while both AI and traditional systems tended to favor highly cited papers and high-impact journals.

Hybrid searching can add value.

A 2025 systematic-review study found that AI-assisted search methods identified unique relevant studies that other approaches missed. The implication is not to reject AI discovery, but to combine methods transparently and match the search strategy to the research purpose.

Five checks when AI helps find the literature

1. **Trace the sources.** Open and examine the original publication rather than relying only on the AI-generated description.
2. **Notice how the question was interpreted.** AI may broaden, narrow, translate, or reorganize your question before searching.
3. **Look for patterns in what you received.** Consider dates, disciplines, methods, publication types, authorship, geographic representation, and perspectives.
4. **Try another discovery route.** Compare the AI-assisted result with library databases, subject databases, citation searching, alternate terminology, or another discovery system.
5. **Match comprehensiveness to purpose.** A quick background search does not require the same level of coverage as a thesis, literature review, systematic review, or publication.

THE RESEARCHER'S RESPONSIBILITY

Do not mistake one discovery pathway for the scholarly record itself.

AI can make discovery faster and sometimes surface relationships or studies that conventional keyword searches miss. Researchers remain responsible for judging relevance, credibility, sufficiency, and how well the evidence represents the scholarly conversation needed for the research task.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH INSIGHT

Developed through Polk Research Intelligence

Polk Research Intelligence is an experimental agentic environmental-scanning workflow designed specifically for UW Oshkosh and Polk Library's role in scholarly research, information literacy, and research support. It scans six external lanes: research evidence, scholarly standards and policy, research technology, library and research-support practice, scholarly communication, and peer institutions.

The workflow then evaluates whether emerging developments matter for research practice and information literacy in the UWO/Polk context. AI assists with scouting, clustering, comparison, and drafting.

Human review is a required gate. A librarian reviews evidence quality, local interpretation, recommendations, disclosure of internal context, and final communication before an insight is shared or incorporated into library guidance. The workflow is intended to support forward-looking awareness and responsible experimentation—not automated institutional decision-making.

Sources

Peer-reviewed evidence

- Clark, J., Barton, B., Albarqouni, L., Byambasuren, O., Jowsey, T., Keogh, J., Liang, T., Moro, C., O'Neill, H., & Jones, M. (2025). Generative artificial intelligence use in evidence synthesis: A systematic review. *Research Synthesis Methods*, 16(4), 601–619. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rsm.2025.16>
- Tosi, D. (2025). Comparing generative AI literature reviews versus human-led systematic literature reviews: A case study on big data research. *IEEE Access*, 13, 56210–56219. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2025.3554504>
- Chandler, K. M., Jordan, K., Al-Naabi, I., Tzanni, P., & Gately, L. (2026). 'GenAI' literature search tools and scholarly diversity: An algorithmic ethnographical analysis. *Open Praxis*, 18(2), 291–309. <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.18.2.970>
- van de Schoot, R., Messina Coimbra, B., Evenhuis, T., Lombaers, P., Weijdem, F., de Bruin, L., Neeleman, R., Grandfield, E., Sijbrandij, M., Teijema, J. J., Jalsovec, E., Bron, M. P., Winter, S. D., de Bruin, J., & van Zuiden, M. (2025). The hunt for the last relevant paper: Blending the best of humans and AI. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 16(1), 2546214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008066.2025.2546214>

Current landscape signals

- Yuan, S., Shetty, N., Verstak, A., & Acharya, A. (2026, June 3). Scholar Labs update: Search 10x faster, 3x deeper. *Google Scholar Blog*. <https://scholar.googleblog.com/2026/>
- Deschenes, A., & McMahon, M. (2026, March 25). *From search to strategy: What student AI use means for the future of academic libraries* [Project briefing]. Coalition for Networked Information. [View briefing](#)

Need help evaluating an AI-assisted search?

Polk Library can help with research strategy, database searching, evidence evaluation, citation tracing, and responsible uses of AI in scholarly research.

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