Take this concept further by visualising all the literature you come across in your research as sea creatures and thinking about the academic depth that they live in.

Ask yourself, have you included enough sea creatures with 'teeth'? Are they living at an appropriate depth for the writing you want to/ have to produce?

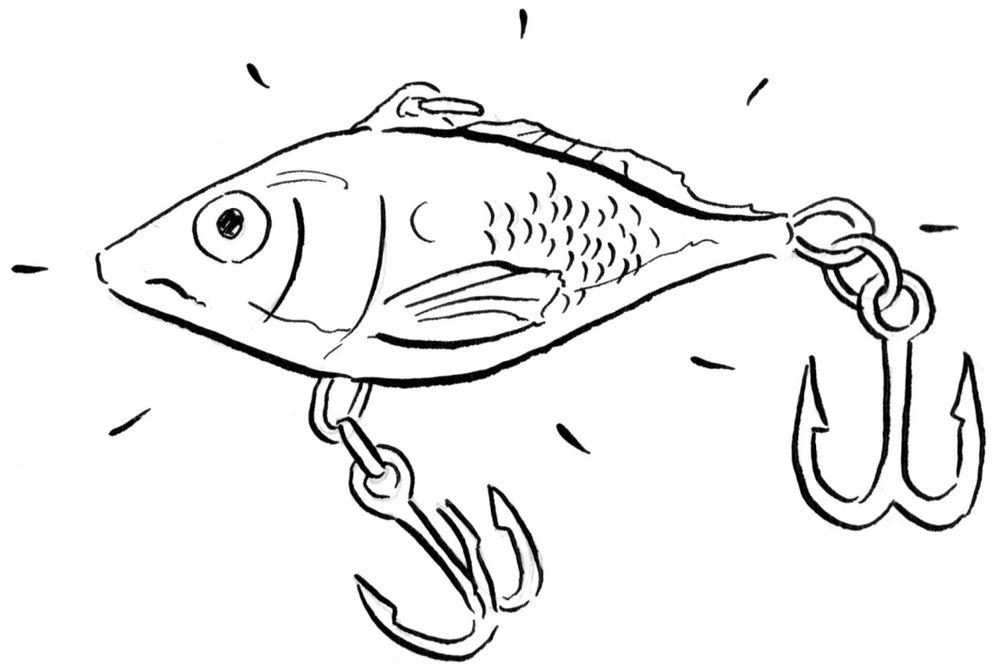
The Fishscale of Academicness

text
by Alke Gröppel-Wegener

illustrations
by Josh Filhol

inspired by an idea
by Claire Penketh

What you should be aiming for is a well-rounded piece of research that has a strong focus.



While you of course want to show off all the reading that you have done, don't be tempted to just make your writing about quoting the exotic seeming things that you have read, an essay full of quotes, while proving that you have done some research, does not show your skills at highlighting **what** is important in what you have found out and **why** that is important.

Information these days seems to be everywhere. But rather than making research easier, this has made it harder, because when doing research you don't just have to find **any** information, you have to find the **right** information.

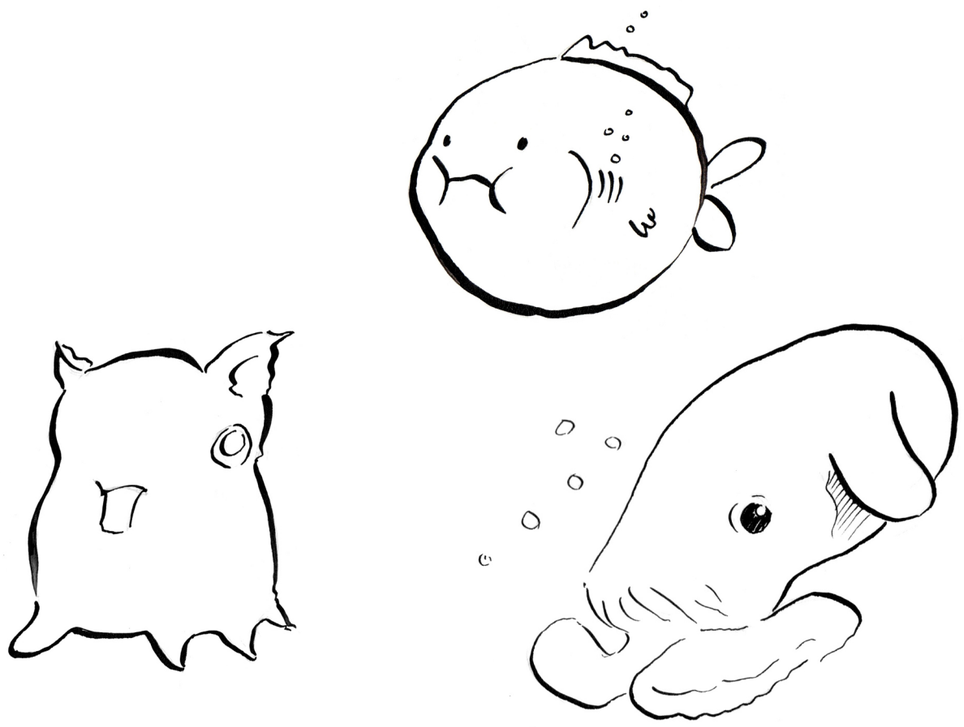
Here's a way how to do just that...

When looking for secondary sources,

You should usually try not to write an essay that is just a list of things one coming after the other. While this might work when you are required to write something based on a chronological structure, it usually ends up being a summary and shows little of your own skills of analysis.

When it comes to writing your own project, think about how this would look as a sea creature - and ask yourself whether it looks like something you had better avoid:

Avoid giving a collection of facts that are not really linked.

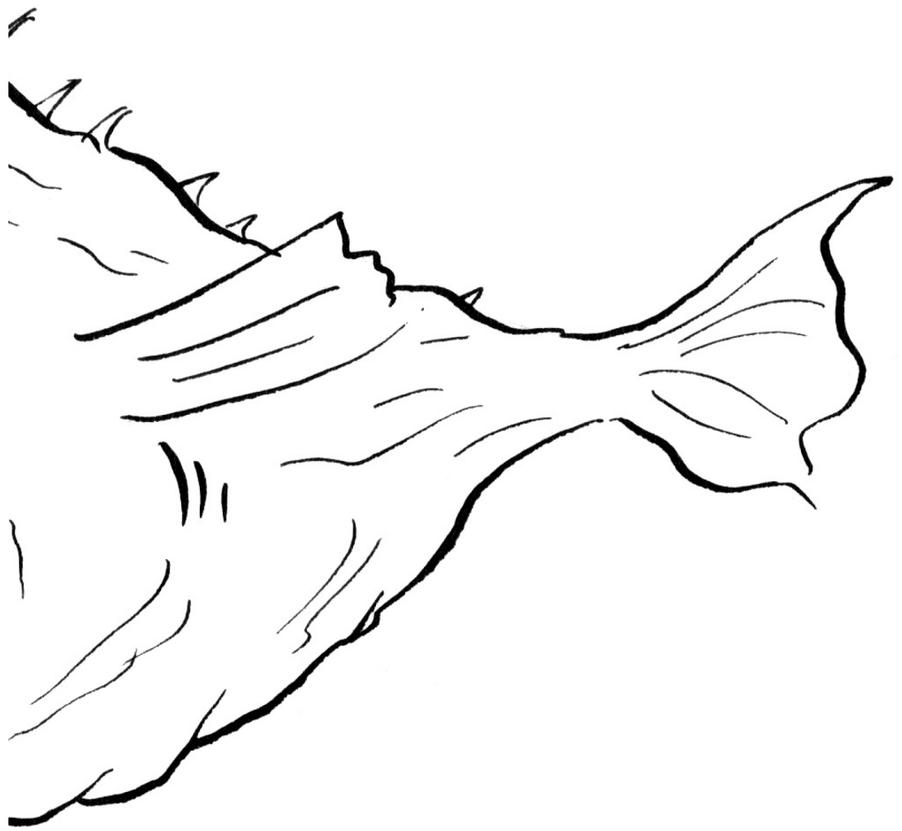


A paragraph on something interesting you learned followed by another paragraph on something interesting you learned is only interesting if you can properly link those paragraphs in a meaningful way.

sometimes it can feel like there is just you - on a makeshift raft - alone in a seemingly endless ocean of information.

Unfortunately, information doesn't appear as a landscape,

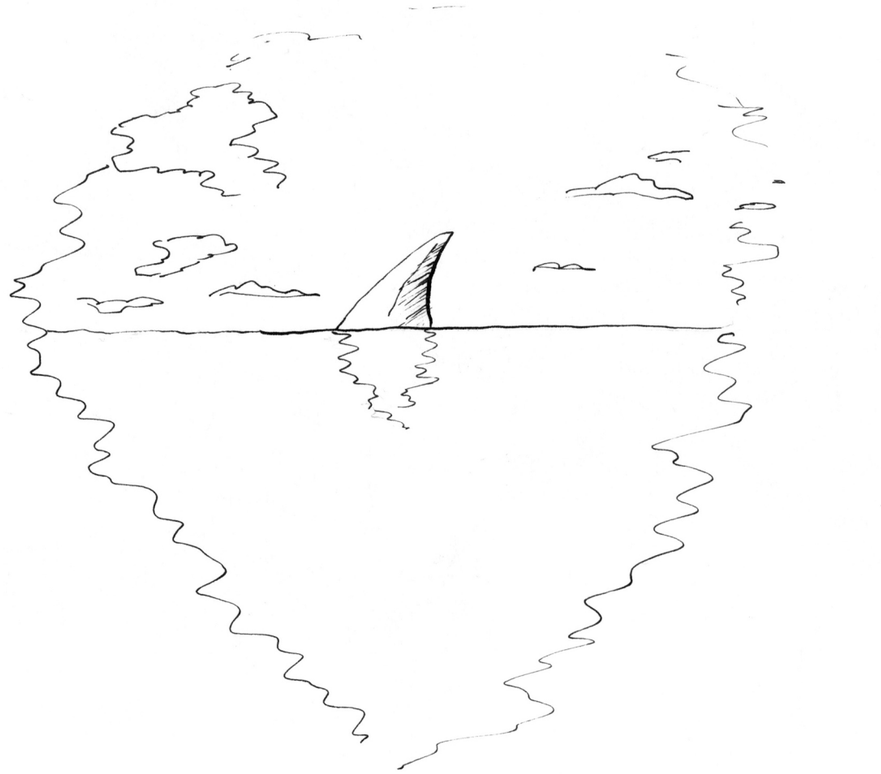
where you can see important landmarks because they rise like mountain tops.



maybe they do live out of your depth for now.

Don’t get frustrated by them: if you have given it a go, carefully re-reading sections and looking up words that you don’t understand,

Because it can seem like a sea, it can be difficult to figure out what exactly goes on below the surface.



Imagine that each of the sources you find is a sea creature

and have a closer look!

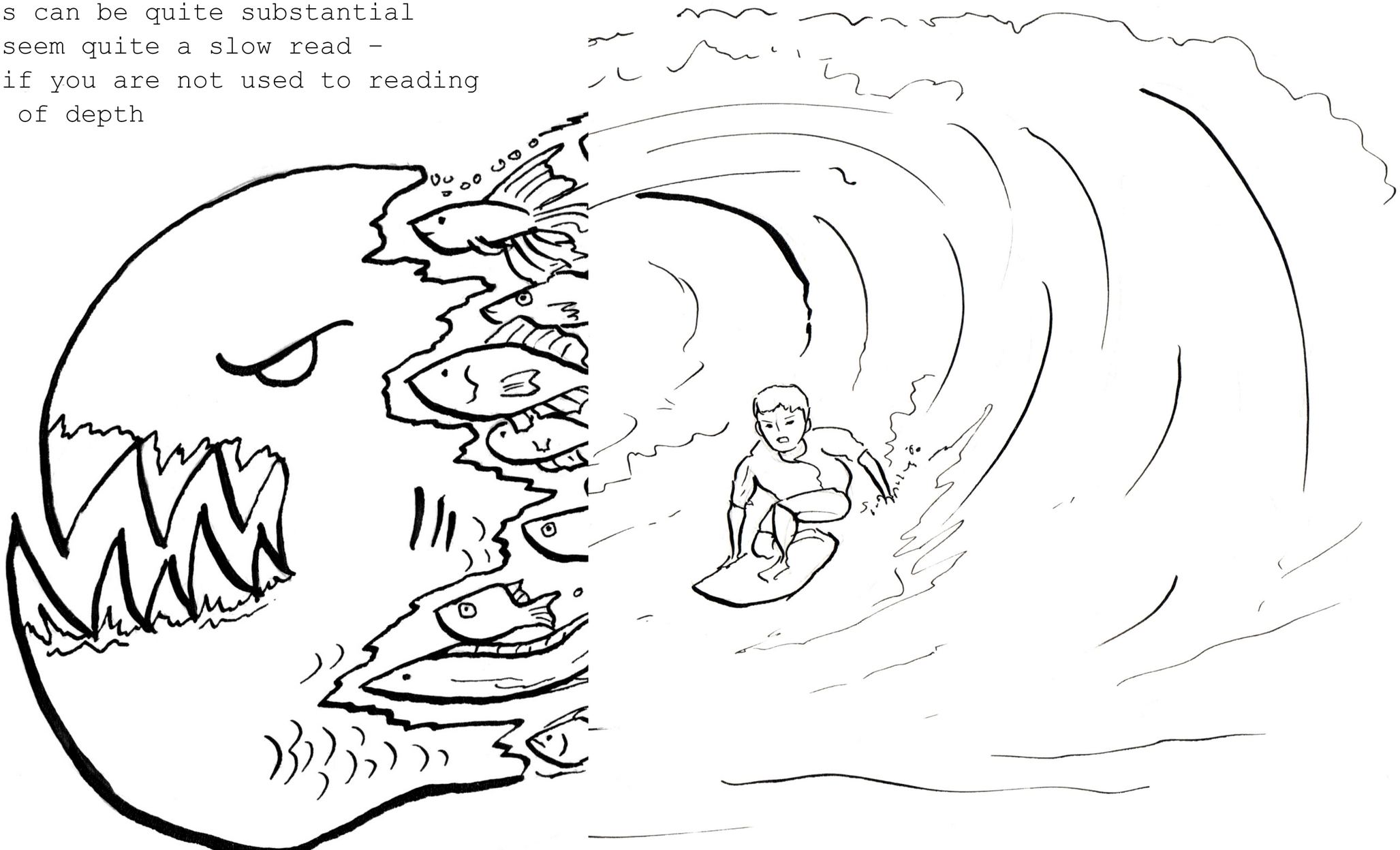
There are different ways to explore
this endless ocean of information.

The first might be to
surf. Websurfing, just
as surfing the waves on
the ocean, is skimming
along on the surface:
it allows you to cover
a lot of ground, but
is not in-depth.

It gets exciting once
you get immersed in the
material, like catching a
wavetunnel and riding it
for as long as you can -
that is getting into the flow of research.

-but
keep in
mind that you
don't have to tackle
a whole book in one
sitting: rather you could break
it up into sections and summarise
them in your own words - breaking
down a big scary source into smaller,
more easily digestible sea creatures…

Academic texts can be quite substantial
and they can seem quite a slow read -
particularly if you are not used to reading
at this level of depth



But there is also a chance that
you could drown
in a tsunami of information.

A more systematic way of looking for sources is an internet search. Rather than going for individual fish, this 'trawls' the ocean of information based on the keywords you use.

Going straight to the article might have a sting in the tail,

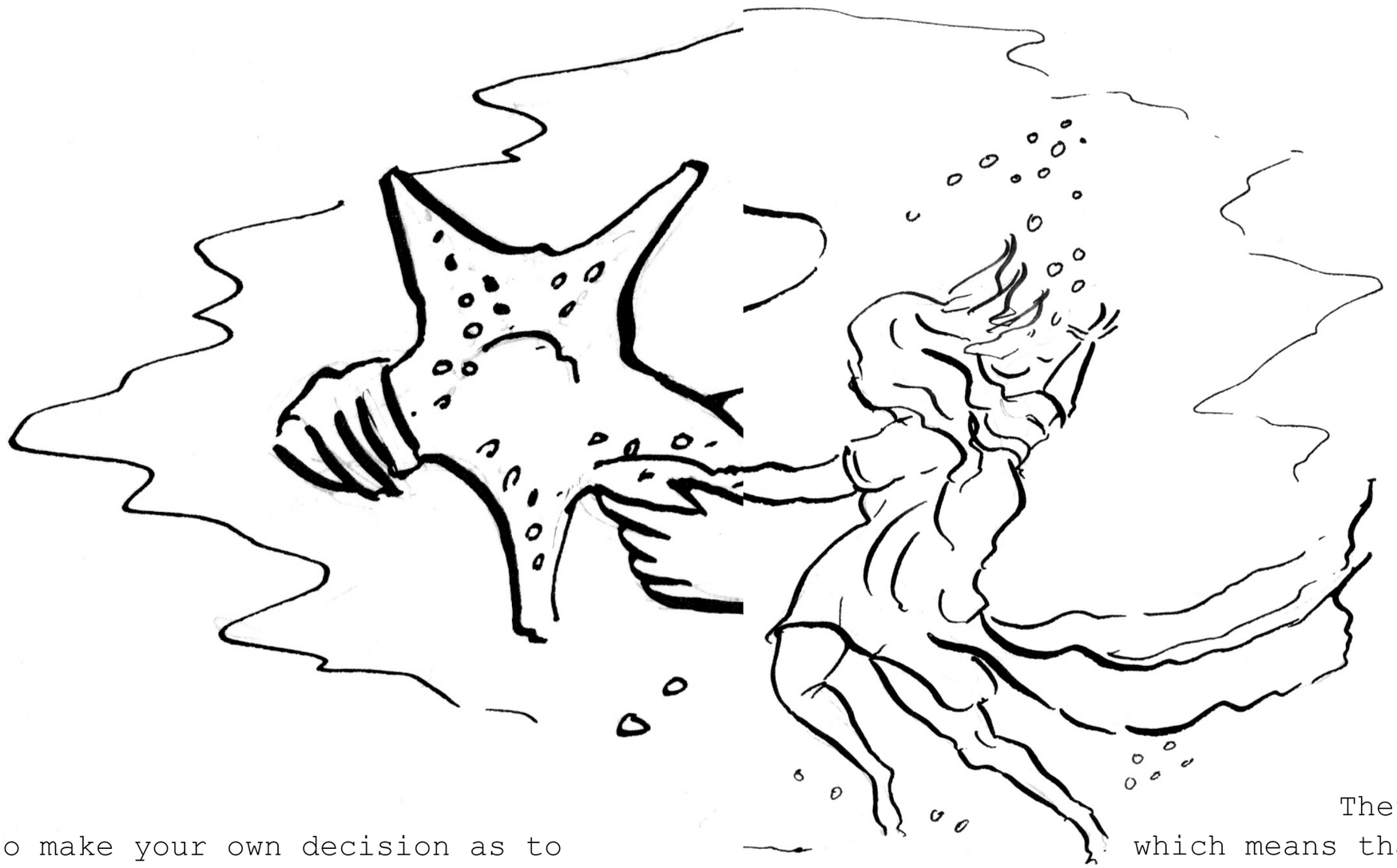
rather pay attention to the 'safer' part of the abstract and introduction to figure out whether this text is actually going to be useful for you before you get frustrated tackling it - only to realise that it wasn't that useful in the first place.

So how best to deal with reading those unfamiliar sources living in the deep sea? Just like learning to dive, this is a process that needs to be practiced, but here are some hints to try out...

Go 'back up' to find some introductory sources, which should help you establish the ideas, debates and perspectives and get you familiar with the jargon, and maybe later in your academic career you can go back down, when tackling a source in the deepest academic abyss will have become easier.

And that means that if you are typing your keywords into a search engine, lots of sources get spewed out.

However, those sources are usually ordered by popularity, rather than the criteria you need as an academic researcher.



You have to make your own decision as to whether the source is any good for your context - and for that you have to look at the **type** of source you have found,

They have 'teeth', which means that there should be a bit of a struggle, getting to grips with them will be worth it, because they contain good evidence.

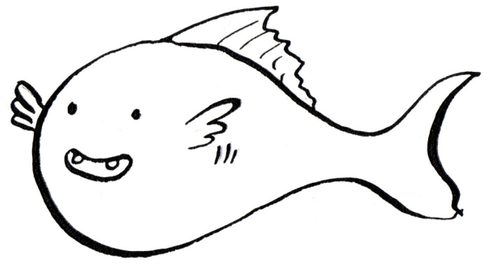
Overall, academic texts should
be challenging.

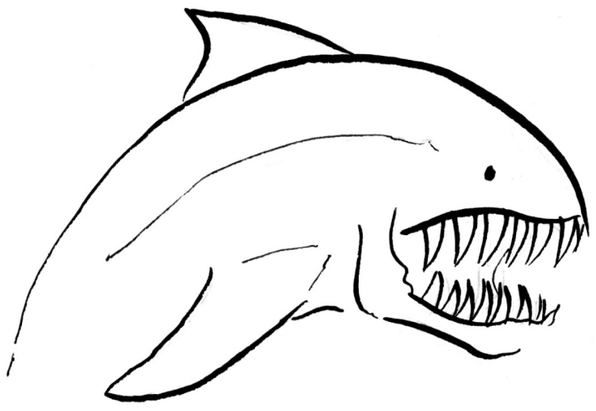
so grab a snorkel
and start investigating...

So look at the source and ask yourself...

If this source was a sea creature, what would it be like – and why?

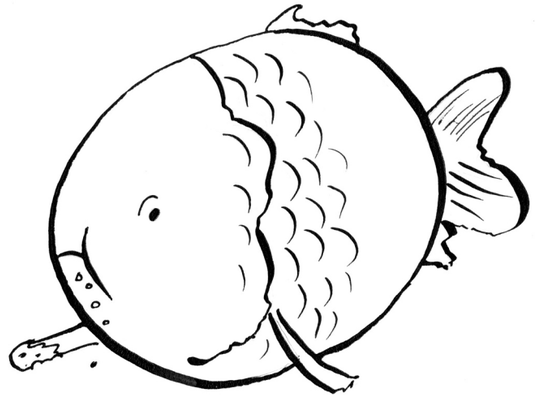
Would it be bright and friendly, because it has lots of pictures in it and is easy to understand?



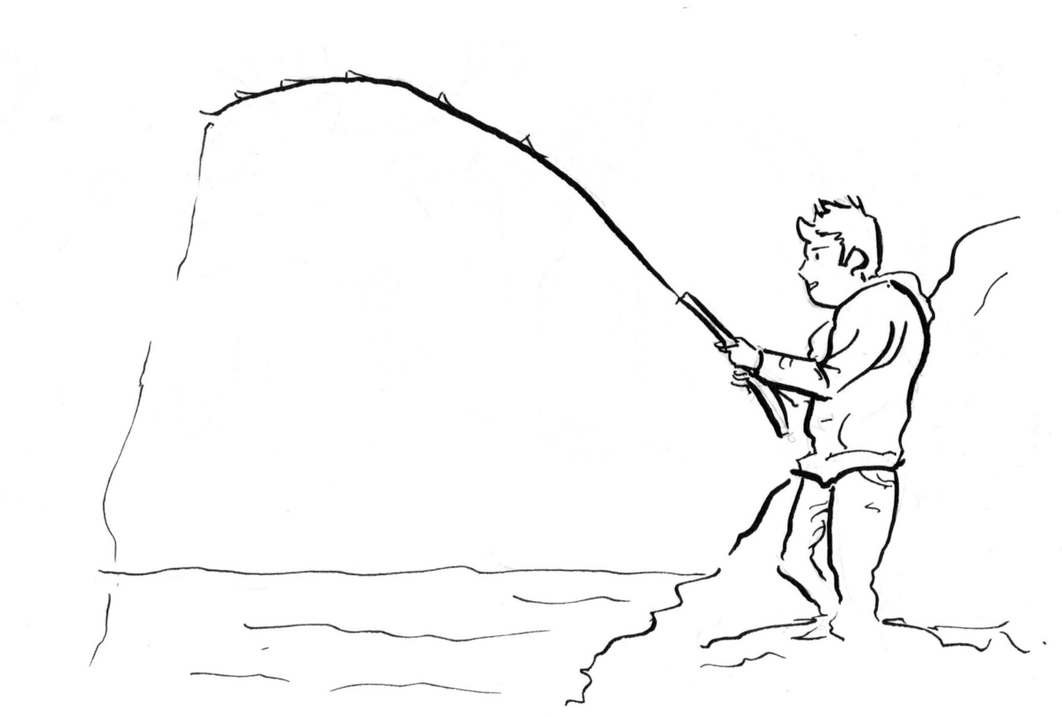


Would it be grey and with dangerous teeth, because it has no illustrations and uses unfamiliar words?

Would it be fat, because it gives you a lot of information on a very specific topic?



but once you have come up with your focus, a research question and key words for a literature search, you will be able to cast a line at the academic depth that you want to dive down to.



That way you find specific, not general, information and evidence.

When it comes to identifying your information keep in mind at the beginning of a research project, you probably have to cast your net wide,

and establish your focus by looking at introductory sources,

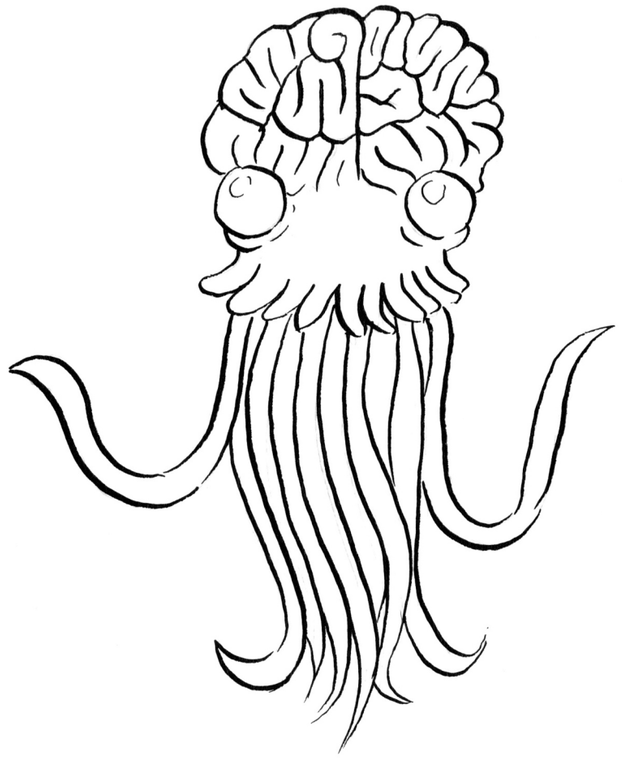
Would it be flat, because it mentions a lot of areas, but none of them in any depth?

Would it be puffed up, because it seems a bit pompous and without real point?

Would it be straight, because the information is presented in a clear way, possibly chronologically?

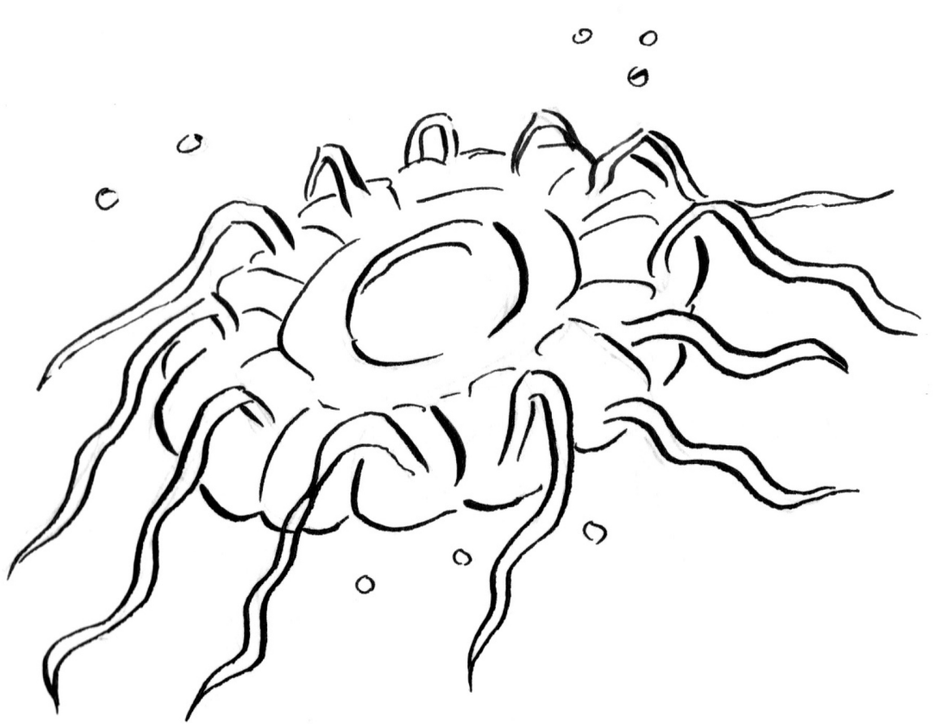
Would it be curled up, because the information is presented in a roundabout way?

Once you have done this, you also need to ask yourself: is this a good academic source? For example, how do you know it is reliable?



(In academic terms we call this establishing a 'provenance' - finding out which context the source comes from)

You might also come across texts that are just too weird. They might have developed at too deep a level to make sense to a non-expert;



PhD or **post-doctoral** work can seem that way when you are starting out in academia.

Academic texts that are found in **journals** tend to be grouped around the theme of the journal, or possibly even a special issue. Reading them can be quite daunting. If a journal is **peer-reviewed** that is a sign of academic depth, and these texts are often written for the expert rather than the novice.

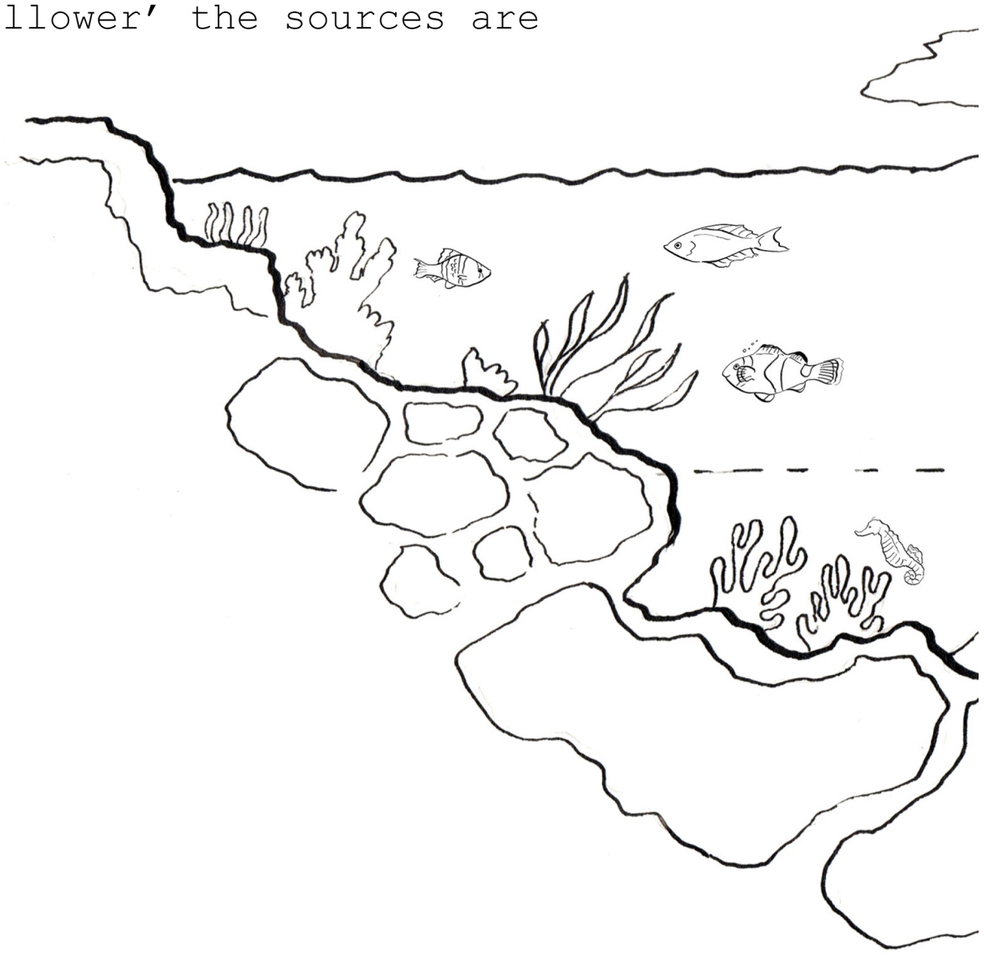
Some academic texts might seem a bit overcomplicated - curly rather than straight forward.

There are different types of sources just as you can find different types of sea creatures in the ocean, and some of them you should really not use as academic evidence, because they may be biased, too simplistic or plain wrong.

Whenever you are doing a literature review, this should always be in your mind, and if you are assessed on the piece of research you are working on, the quality of the sources will be taken into account.

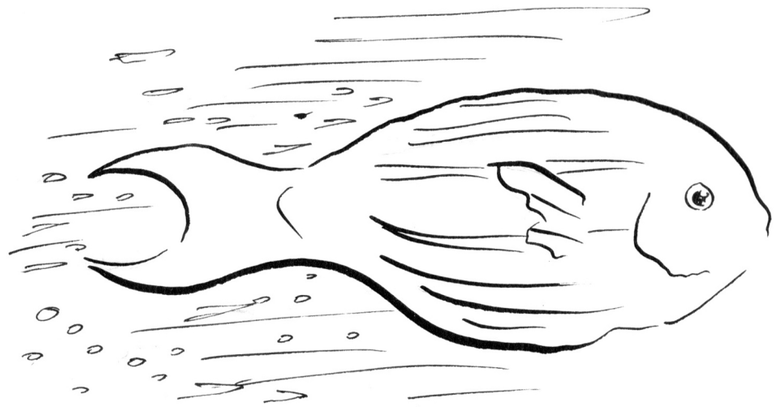
So rather than just thinking of the sources as sea creatures, also think about **where they live** by visualising an ocean full of creatures that are living at different depths...

the more towards the surface they dwell,
the ‘shallower’ the sources are

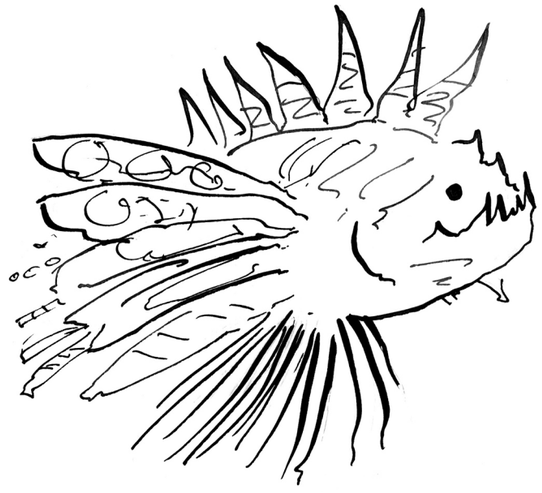


the further down they are,
the ‘deeper’ and more theoretical they are.

Others give a brief introduction to a lot of issues, but don’t go into much detail for each of them. In a way they are cutting through the strata of information and could be imagined as horizontally striped.

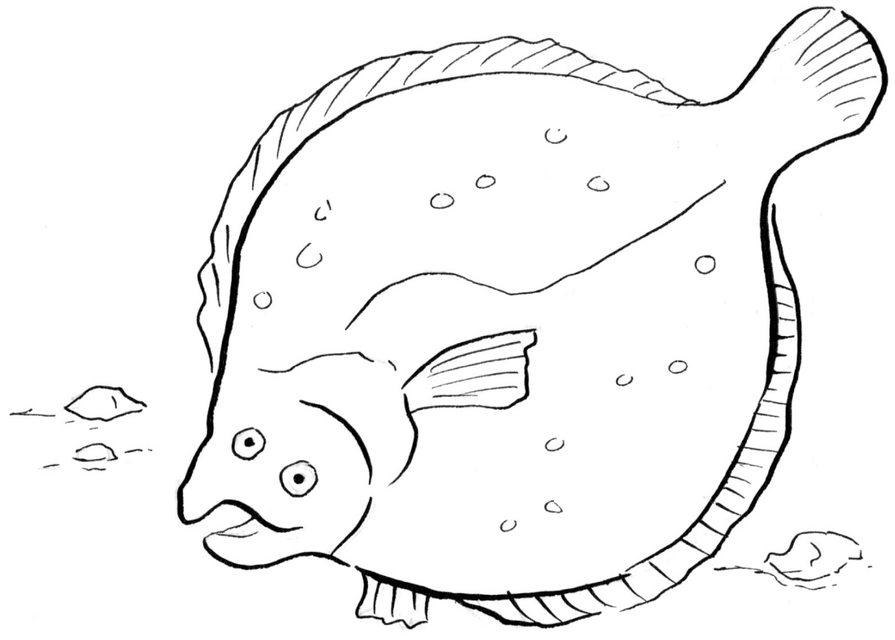


Academic overviews can take the form of a quite linear narrative, for example showing a chronological order of events - one happening after the other.

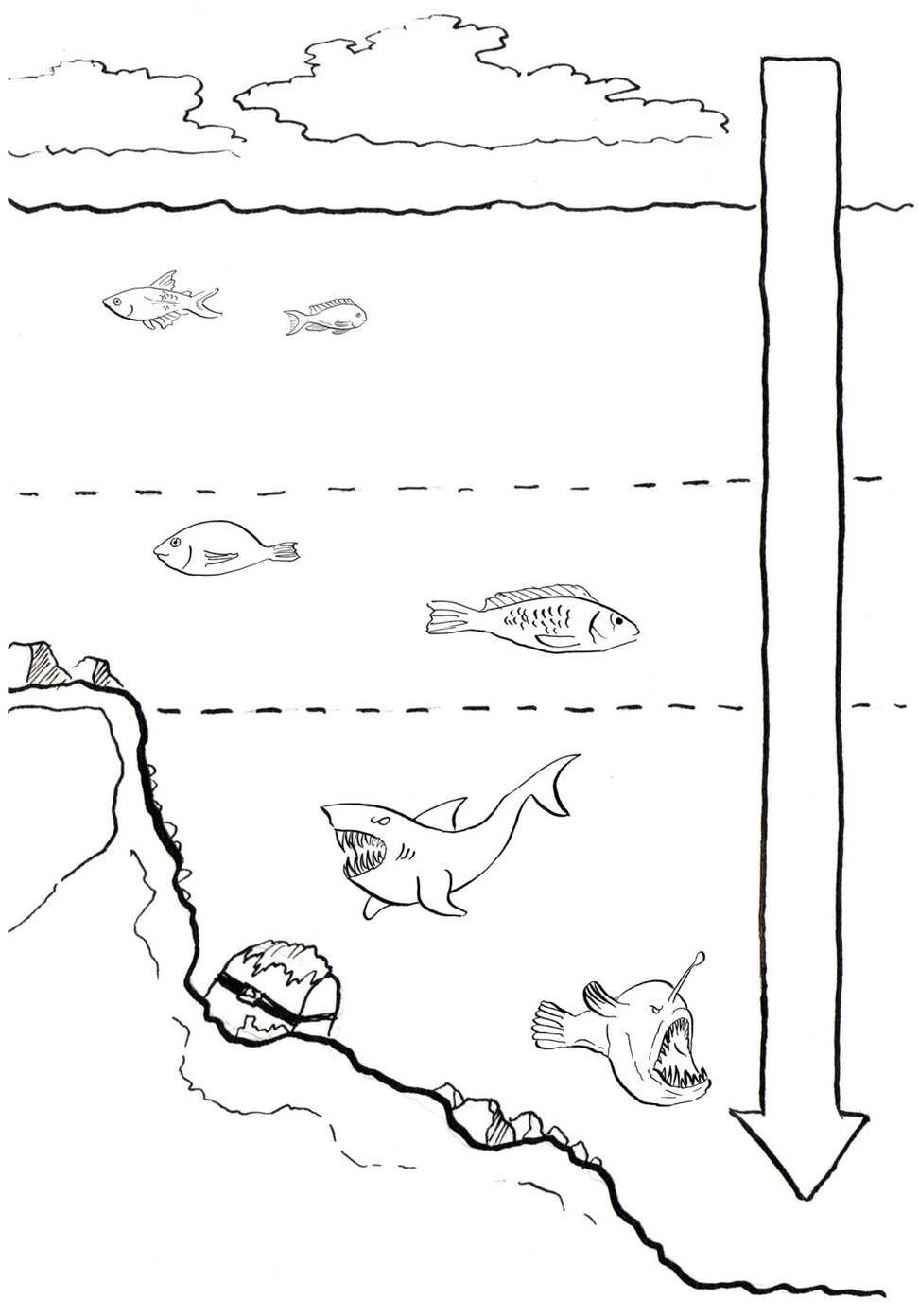


They could also be centred around a main focus, but branching into a few aspects that are discussed in detail.

Introductory academic texts, like Readers, are a good starting point, because they will get you familiar with the key ideas and debates in the field, its jargon and probably also introduce notable authors.



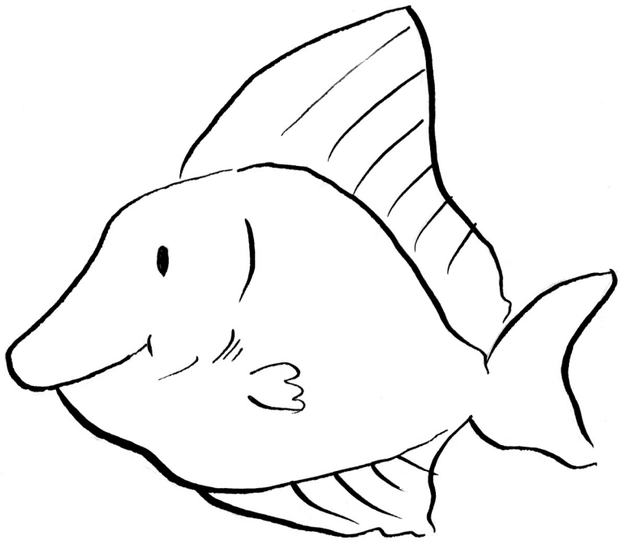
They tend to be flat in that they usually cover only an insight into a field of work. Some do that by concentrating on one particular issue, so they could be seen as flat horizontally.



What you need to do is put these two things together - the type of source and their 'academicness'. Can you order the sources you have found on a scale from shallow to deep?

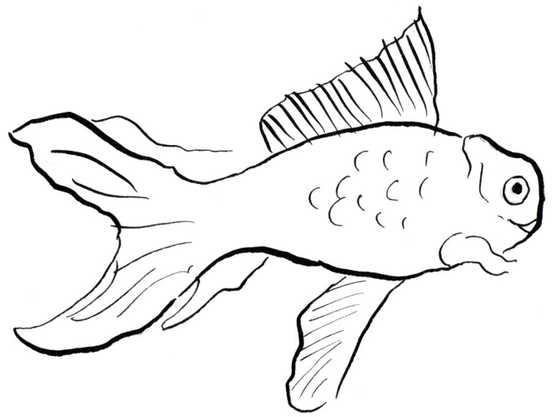
Consider what audience they were written for, their writing style and look out for clues of academic writing – referencing, footnotes, indexes, bibliographies or reference lists.

Here are some examples to get you started, starting from the surface of the ocean, going deeper:



Children's books are friendly, bold, and roam very much on the surface.

Personal opinion pieces, such as blog posts, reviews or letters to the editor are usually just that: personal.
That makes them less academic, because they are subjective.



They also are usually short and not linked, like one in a swarm of little fish. Or they are like goldfish, little gems of amazement, but not really that substantial.

Newspaper articles are a good example of texts written for a general audience.
If published in a reputable newspaper they are researched well, but they will probably show some bias.

They make far reaching links and put their subjects into a larger context, but usually stop short of real academic depth as they are aimed at non-experts.