How to Read a Journal Article

If you are in college, you are going to need to read articles published in academic and professional journals at some point. However, these articles can be complex and difficult to read and understand. This handout describes a method for reading that can make the process easier.

1. UNDERSTAND HOW A JOURNAL ARTICLE IS STRUCTURED

Here is an outline of how most journal articles are organized:

- **Abstract:** This short section provides a brief overview of the article. Reading this first can help you decide if the article is relevant to your topic or interests.
- **Introduction:** The second section of the article introduces the problem and reviews previous research and literature on the topic. This part of the article will help you better understand the background of the research and the current question that is under investigation.
- **Method Section:** This part of the article details how the research was done. Information about the participants, the procedures, the instruments and the variables that were measured are all described in this section.
- **Results Section:** This section details what the researchers found when they did the study and can often be very technical. Tables of data, graphs and charts are frequently included in addition to the text.
- **Discussion/Conclusion Section:** In this section, the author(s) interpret the results, outline the implications of the study and provide possible descriptions of future research that should be conducted.
- **References Section:** This section lists all of the articles and other sources cited within the article.

2. PREVIEW THE ARTICLE

Your first step should be to briefly preview the article. Previewing is a great way to become familiar with the topic and the information included.

Attempting a thorough reading before you’ve skimmed the article is not only difficult; it may be a waste of time. In some cases, previewing may show that the article is not well-suited to your needs, which can save time by allowing you to move on to another article that is more useful.

During the preview don't worry if you don't fully understand the article. However, you will want to recognize and make note of ideas or vocabulary that you don't understand but appear to be important.
Steps of the preview:

1. Locate and read any information about the author(s): Who are they? What do they do? Where do they work? What is their position? The answers to these questions can give you keys to their purposes and backgrounds and to possible motivations, intentions and bias.

2. Read the abstract to determine the overall purpose, results and conclusions of the article. A good abstract will provide a summary of the most important information.

3. Examine the illustrations, tables and charts in the results section to understand their main points. Graphs in particular often summarize a lot of written material.

4. Read all of the introduction. Then read only the first line of each paragraph of the methods and results sections. In a well-written article, you will find that the first lines will usually give an overview of the content. Finally, read the entire discussion/conclusion section.

By the end of the preview, you should be able to summarize the article into one or two sentences.

3. READING FURTHER

Now comes the time for some important decisions:

- Do you read further?
- If so, do you want to read the entire article, or just certain sections?
- Of the sections you are going to read, are there some you only need to understand at a basic level and others you need to understand completely?

Below are some ways to go deeper into the article:

Take Notes on Each Section and Ask Questions: Carefully read through each section, taking notes as you go. Write down important points and any terminology or concepts that you do not understand. Once you've read the entire article, look up the information that you didn't understand using another source. This might involve using a dictionary, textbook, online resource or even asking a classmate or your professor.

Identify Key Information: Whether you are looking for information that supports the hypothesis in your own paper or are analyzing the article and critiquing the research methods or findings, there are important questions that you should answer as you read the article.

1. What is the main hypothesis?
2. Why is this research important?
3. Did the researchers use appropriate measurements and procedures?
4. What were the variables in the study?
5. What was the key finding of the research?
6. Do the findings justify the author's conclusions?

Note the Sources Cited: When reading a research article, it’s easy to overlook the references. However, the reference section can actually be one of the most important parts of the article, especially if you are looking for further sources for your own paper. You can discover important research articles on the topic in which you are interested by spending some time reviewing this section.

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