How to Read (and Understand) a Social Science Journal Article

What is an academic journal article?

Academic journals are periodicals in which researchers publish their work. They are typically peer-reviewed journals, meaning that the work is reviewed and evaluated by other scholars *prior* to publication in an effort to ensure that only the best, most rigorously researched articles are published.

Journal articles offer a window into the inner workings of a discipline. They demonstrate how social scientists formulate hypotheses, design empirical studies, analyze the observations they collect, and interpret their results.

Journal articles can appear daunting and often make for dense, dry reading, but they generally follow a standardized format. Once you understand the structure of each article, knowing where to look for important information and understanding the content becomes much easier.

Anatomy of a journal article

A journal article is composed of inter-related parts. Together, they tell a story about a piece of research.

Element	What it is	What it tells you
Title	The title presents a concise statement of the theoretical issues investigated.	*What is this article about?*
Abstract	One paragraph that appears before the article. It provides a summary of the entire article.	*What is this article about?* What topic is the author studying? What was her primary finding?
Introduction	This section introduces the topic of the article and discusses what the article contributes to existing knowledge on the topic.	*What is this article about?* What does the author plan to do in the paper? Why should we care about this problem/study? What is the author trying to test or show? How does she intend to contribute to the field?
Literature Review (this can either be included in the introduction or come after the introduction under its own subtitle)	The purpose of a literature review is to discuss previous work on the topic, point out what questions remain, and relate the research presented in the rest of the article to the existing literature. There should also be a clear discussion of the author's research hypotheses.	*What do we already know about this topic and what is left to discover?* What are some of the most important past findings on this topic? How have these past studies led the author to do this particular study? What are the research hypotheses?
Methods and data	The methods section provides information about the individuals that the author studied and the way that she conducted her analysis. It includes information about the participants, the procedures, the instruments and the variables that were measured.	*What data did the author use and how did she analyze them?* Who were the participants in this sample? What makes them unique? Is the sample a good representation of the entire population? If not, how are they different? Is the study qualitative (based on interviews, ethnography, participant observation, or content analysis), quantitative (based on statistical analysis), or multi-method (includes both qualitative and quantitative analysis)?
Results	The results section explains what the	*What did the author find?*

Element	What it is	What it tells you
	author found when she analyzed her data. It can be quite technical, reporting the results in detailed statistical language. Tables and figures are frequently included.	
Discussion & conclusion	Articles typically end by discussing in "plain English" what the results mean and how the study contributes to existing knowledge. Here the research questions are answered and it should be clear at this point whether the hypotheses were supported. The conclusion is the final section. It relates the research back to the larger context, and suggests avenues for future research.	*What does it all mean and why is it important?* What were the authors' overall findings? Why are these findings important? What limitations of the study do the authors identify (if any)? What suggestions for future research do the authors make (if any)?
References	This section lists all of the articles and other sources cited within the article.	

When it comes to reading journal articles, reading linearly (like you would a novel, starting at the beginning and reading word for word until you reach the end) is often not the most efficient approach. Depending on your goal, you may need to cut through peripheral details, ignore sophisticated statistics with which you may not be familiar, and focus on the central ideas.

How, then, *should* you read an article?

1. Determine your purpose
   Before you even start reading, take a moment to think about what you need to get out of the article. Is this an assignment for class discussion, an article you want to use in a term paper (if so, how much of it will you need to use), or one about which you need to write a critique/review? Are you interested in the author's theoretical perspective? Her findings? Her methods? Her data? Are you interested in getting a sense of the research that has been done on a specific topic/issue? Knowing the answer to these questions will determine your reading strategy.

2. Devise a reading strategy

	I'm looking for…												
	Big picture	More detail	Nitty-gritty	Main points	New claims	Evidence	Theory	Data/analysis	Graphs, tables	Implications	Limitations	Publications on this topic	What is known about topic
Title	X												
Abstract	X			X	X					X			
Introduction		X											X
Literature review			X			X						X	X
Methods/data			X					X					
Results			X		X				X				
Discussion/Conclusion		X		X	X					X	X		
References			X									X	

3. <u>Understand the difference between structural reading and close reading</u>
   Structural reading is "a form of close reading applied to the overall structure of an extended text (usually a book). We focus on what we can learn about the book from its title, introduction, table of contents" (Paul and Elder 2008). The overview that this approach provides gives perspective. It helps the reader to determine whether she wants to spend time reading the text and how closely she wants to read it. It also guides her reading, like a mental scaffolding.
   When reading structurally, ask these questions:
   - What does the title tell me about this article?
   - What is the main idea in the article? (skim the abstract and introduction)
   - What are the parts of the whole? What are the sections of the article?
   - In light of my structural reading, what questions would I pursue during close reading?

   Close reading is exactly as the name suggests. It requires that the reader get up-close and personal with the text. When reading closely, you may want to stop after every paragraph to summarize what is being said, reflect on the arguments being made, and evaluate the quality of the evidence being presented. This requires active engagement (or dialogue) with the text. Take ownership of what you read: mark the text up, jot down questions, comments or observations in the margins, highlight important passages/quotes, and take notes as you go. Interacting with the text in these ways makes it more likely that you will remember the information as well.

4. <u>Don't waste time!</u>
   Very few articles in a field are so important that every word needs to be read carefully. It's okay to skim and move on ☺

Sources:
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