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	What is this article about?					
	the theoretical issues investigated.						
Abstract	One paragraph that appears before the	What is this article about?					
	article. It provides a summary of the	What topic is the author studying?					
	entire article.	What was her primary finding?					
Introduction	This section introduces the topic of the	What is this article about?					
	article and discusses what the article	What does the author plan to do in the paper?					
	contributes to existing knowledge on the	Why should we care about this					
	topic.	problem/study?					
		What is the author trying to test or show?					
		How does she intend to contribute to the					
		field?					
Literature Review	The purpose of a literature review is to	What do we already know about this topic and					
(this can either be	discuss previous work on the topic, point	what is left to discover?					
included in the	out what questions remain, and relate	What are some of the most important past					
introduction or come after the introduction	the research presented in the rest of the	findings on this topic?					
under its own subtitle)	article to the existing literature. There	How have these past studies led the author to					
dider its own subtitle)	should also be a clear discussion of the	do this particular study?					
	author's research hypotheses.	What are the research hypotheses?					
Methods and data	The methods section provides	What data did the author use and how did she					
	information about the individuals that	analyze them?					
	the author studied and the way that she	Who were the participants in this sample?					
	conducted her analysis. It includes	What makes them unique?					
	information about the participants, the	Is the sample a good representation of the					
	procedures, the instruments and the	entire population? If not, how are they					
	variables that were measured.	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 &	Articles typically end by discussing in	What does it all mean and why is it important?
conclusion	"plain English" what the results mean	What were the authors' overall findings?
	and how the study contributes to existing	Why are these findings important?
	knowledge. Here the research questions	What limitations of the study do the authors
	are answered and it should be clear at	identify (if any)?
	this point whether the hypotheses were	What suggestions for future research do the
	supported. The conclusion is the final	authors make (if any)?
	section. It relates the research back to	
	the larger context, and suggests avenues	
	for future research.	
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 <u>not</u> 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	Х												
Abstract	Χ			Χ	Х					Х			
Introduction		Х											Χ
Literature review			Х				Х					Х	Х
Methods/data			Х					Х					
Results			Х			Х			Х				
Discussion/Conclusion		Х		Х	Х					Х	Х		
References			Χ									Χ	

3. Understand the difference between structural reading and close reading

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. Don't waste time!

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:

Paul, R. and Elder, L. 2008. *How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading*. Dillon Beach, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

Weir, R. 2011. "It's Not Harry Potter" *Inside Higher Ed* http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/instant_mentor/essay_on_teaching_students_to_read_journal_articles#ix zz2W75q1Gqg Accessed 6/13/2013.