

How to read a journal article – the essentials

Journal articles often follow a particular format because they report on the results of primary research. You therefore need to understand what to expect with each section in order to read more effectively. Some of these sections may have different names and titles, but you should expect to see all of the elements described at some point in the article.

The idea of primary research is to develop and contribute new knowledge to the field, so journal articles report on research projects to show what they have found out that is new in their area. 'New' in academic terms usually means a very specific development, a new interpretation of an old phenomenon or a revision or checking if findings from one study can be repeated in a new context. These are not always brand new, completely original results, in other words. Journal articles will therefore try to set out the 'research gap' – what is not known or not established in previous research, or the extent to which this research is limited or flawed. Then, they will try to show how their research fills this gap.

If the article does not report on primary research, it is likely to follow a different structure, possibly more narrative or thematic.

To read more effectively, first skim read to get an overview of the text, identify the key information and know what to expect from each section. Consult the [Reading Guides](#) for more information.

Then, read more critically. Analyse and evaluate each section, by asking questions such as:

- *Why* is this research important?
 - Has it been undertaken *effectively* (methodology)?
 - Are the decisions and conclusions logical?
 - What is the relevance to the authors' aim?
- *How* does this article support / relate to your hypothesis/ research or assignment?
 - Where and how will I use the information?
 - How does it link to other sources you have read?

Components of a Journal

Abstract: A succinct summary of the entire paper; read this to decide whether this paper is really useful for you and whether to read the whole thing in detail or not. Please note that if you do not read the whole thing, it is not appropriate to include it in your reference list! Referencing implies familiarity with the entire source.

Introduction: This should include the problem the research is trying to solve or question it is trying to answer (the aim); the rationale or reason why the problem or question is important; some context or background to the real-life occurrence of the problem or situation; and an outline for the rest of the article.

- Read this to understand what the paper is about.
- Critically evaluate to see whether you accept the rationale for the research and whether the aim or questions are sufficiently clear and precisely defined. Sometimes they are quite vague and woolly, and some researchers undertake 'vanity projects' – research that sounds exciting but doesn't really achieve anything or contribute significant new knowledge.

Background and/or literature review: Conceptual or theoretical framework; covers previous research in the field and its limitations; and the need for this new research (will relate to the rationale) (NB: this may appear in the introduction sometimes).

- Read this to find out how the research fits in with previous research and to develop your understanding of the conceptual or theoretical framework
- Critically evaluate whether the framework is appropriate and how extensive their literature review is (e.g. check reference dates to see if they are up to date or not)

Method(ology): The section which discusses how the data was collected; what type of data i.e. quantitative or qualitative; who the participants were and how they were recruited to the study; where the study was done; any limitations to this approach; why all of these decisions were made (justification).

- Read this when you are thinking about your dissertation to see what methods are typically used in your subject area
- Critically evaluate what the authors have chosen to do against your knowledge of alternative methodologies: what could they have done differently? Is their justification strong enough?

Results: This part describes what the research found.

- Read this to find out whether the results support your initial idea about the topic
- Critically evaluate whether or not the results support the authors' hypothesis

Discussion: The authors' interpretation - what the data means; how the results compare to previous research; how they relate to the conceptual or theoretical framework; whether this meets the aims of the research or answers the research

questions. (NB In qualitative research, this section is often combined with the results. In quantitative or scientific approaches, it is typically separate).

- Read this to see whether the results are interpreted the way you would interpret them
- Critically evaluate if the authors' interpretation is valid and provides the best possible interpretation

Conclusions: These sum up the whole article; explain whether the aims have been met or not and what the answers to the research questions are;

- Read this to see whether the findings prove the initial hypothesis the authors' suggested in the introduction and whether it achieves the aim
- Critically evaluate whether it *actually* achieves the aim or whether this is down to the way that authors have interpreted their results
- Recommendations? Suggestions for changes to practice or real life, depending on the nature and topic of the research; possibly suggestions for future research.