Journal Reading and Note-Taking Information

Information contained in a standard journal article reporting research

There is some variation in the way journals format research articles, but there is some standard information that is included no matter what the format. Here are some of the key components of articles and the questions they answer:

“What is this article about?”

Abstract: Most articles start with a paragraph called the “abstract”, which very briefly summarizes the whole article.

Introduction: This section introduces the topic of the article completely and discusses what the article contributes to existing knowledge on the topic.

“What do we already know about this topic and what is left to discover?”

Literature review: A review of existing research and theory on the topic is either included in the introduction or comes after the introduction under its own subtitle. The review of literature is meant 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. Here should also be a clear discussion of what the hypotheses were at the beginning of the project.

“How did the author do the research?”

Methods and data: There is always some discussion of the methods used to conduct the study being reported.

“What did the author find and how did they find it?”

Analysis and Results: Another important section or sections will be devoted to discussing the kind of analysis that was conducted on the data and what the results are.

“What does it all mean and why is it important?”

Discussion and Conclusion: Articles typically end by discussing 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 or not the hypotheses were supported or not. The conclusion is usually the final section and it typically places the research in a larger context, explaining the importance of the research and discussing where future research on the topic should be headed.

Shortcuts to reading journal articles

When conducting your own research in the future, you will encounter dozens of possibilities in your search for sources that may be relevant to your research. Most often you will find more
sources than you can possibly read thoroughly in the time you have to do your project. So you will not have time to read everything chronologically from start to finish. Here are some hints on how to sift through the multiple possibilities, discard articles that are less helpful, and recognize potentially important sources.

Read the abstract first: Titles don’t always give much information. The abstract should give you just enough information to let you know the basics of the article. From this you will know whether you should read on or look elsewhere for your project. Some journals print a list of keywords pertaining to the article as well. These are further clues about the article.

Read the introduction and discussion/conclusion next: These sections will give you the main argument of the article, which should be helpful in determining its relevance to you and your project. You’ll also get a glimpse of the findings of the research being reported.

Read about the methods next: If what you’ve read so far interests you, get a sense of how the research was done. Is it a qualitative or quantitative project? What data are the study based on?

Read the Analysis and results next: If you decide that you are committed to this article, you should read in more detail about this research. The Analysis may be confusing, especially if it’s a scientific study so focus on the results, which is just an interpretation of what the data reveals.

How to Take Notes on the Article

There are a few major ways to take notes, but this is a personal style choice. Try different ways, but use the one that fits you best. Below are some suggestions for note-taking:

- Pay attention to what each section is about. The Abstract, Discussion, and Conclusion sections usually have the most important information.
- Take notes while you are reading (that way you don’t have to go back and re-read it when you write your paper) → use the margins to underline, take notes
- When finishing the Abstract, Discussion and Conclusion, figure out what questions you may have, then go back and try and have them answered by reading the article again.
- Write summarizing notes for main points (in the margin, or on a separate piece of paper)
- Highlight only very important quotes or terms

Adapted from Purdue University and Pasadena City College