

How to read a journal article

Why is it important to know about journal articles?

In many of your assessments at university you will be required to use the most 'scholarly material' available to validate your research and support your arguments. 'Scholarly' generally means journal articles that are written by scholars or professionals who are experts in their fields. Journal articles therefore are generally considered to be scholarly, and are usually the most reliable sources for you to obtain subject specific information for your academic studies /assessment writing.

What is a journal article?

- Academic journals are periodicals which publish articles of academic research and findings.
- Articles that are published usually discuss recent research.
- Journal articles may include theoretical discussions and critical review of previously published work.
- Journal articles may also include *empirical* findings (data from actual observation or experimentation).

Some journals have a higher reputation than others:

- *Scholarly* journals are discipline (subject) specific and usually require assessment by an independent review board prior to publication. However, not all Scholarly Journals are *peer reviewed*.
- *Peer reviewed* (or *refereed*) journals have the highest reputation as they have been subjected to a rigorous assessment by experts and academics in a subject area before publication approval.
- *Peer reviewed* (or *refereed*) journals are therefore the *most* scholarly material available.
- Top academic journals are usually peer-reviewed journals.

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Top Tip – Finding Discipline Specific Journals...

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A common structure of a journal article

Before outlining one common journal article structure, it is important to note that journal articles are written in accordance with expected academic conventions. This includes the referencing style that is typically used within the discipline specific area. Additionally, journal articles are usually written for an academic audience who are familiar with the terminology ('discipline-specific vocabulary') that is typical in that field of study.

Therefore, to understand an academic article appropriately, it is important that you already have some familiarity with the theory aligning to the subject specific area that you are studying.



Top Tip – Understand the theory in your text book / study guide before attempting to analyse a journal article.

A common journal article structure and recommended reading strategy

The structure outlined below is most commonly seen in articles which are reporting the results of original research.

Journal article heading	What is discussed	What this reveals	Recommended reading strategy
Title	A concise statement of the research issues investigated	What the article is about	Find titles closest to your assessment task
Abstract	Summary of entire article including - aims / method/results	The overall picture	Read 1st to overview the relevance to your task
Introduction	General introduction to the topic / research area / overview of the current study outlined in article	The background	Read the introduction to gain a clear picture of what the research is about and why it is important
Literature review	Reviews previous literature relating to study – (sometimes included in introduction)	Previous research / rationale / justification for current research / identifies 'gap' in research	Often describes author's different viewpoints – may help you with context, critical analysis and to develop an 'argument' in your assessment
Methods/methodology	Identifies the methods used in the research – e.g. quantitative/ qualitative/, statistical, survey, focus group, interview	How the research was conducted	Refer to this section to substantiate the validity & reliability of the research method.
Results	Outlines the statistical analyses, or qualitative conclusions of the data	The main findings	Look for key statistics and qualitative findings to help substantiate your assessment argument / critical analysis
Discussion	Discusses main findings of the current study and their contribution / importance to the academic field and / or practice.	The significance of the findings	Refer to this to frame the importance of the research, may also help with practical implementation recommendations
Conclusion	Summarises article, identifies study limitations and future research directions	Future research possibilities	Identifying 'gaps' in the literature. Future research recommendations
References	Appropriate 'end' references in required referencing 'style' of all of the scholarly sources cited as evidence throughout the journal article	The research that was cited in the article	A good article will reference other journal articles that have important relevance to the topic area.

Step-by-step guide to reading a journal article

1. Determine your purpose. Before you even start reading, consider what you need to get out of the article. Is the assignment for class discussion, a blog post, or an assessment that requires you to critically analyse a topic? 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 undertaken on a specific topic/issue? Knowing the answer to these questions will determine your reading strategy.
2. Read the title, headings and subheadings. Do they provide a map for the reader and summarise the key subject matter and the structure of the overall argument? In a well written article you can usually tell what the argument is from the title, headings and subheadings.

3. Read the abstract to gain an overview of the entire article context, including the aims and key results. Read the introduction to understand why the research is being conducted, and why it is important.
4. Often reading the conclusion before the body will provide you with a critical reference point of the main findings, significance and implications of the research.
5. Take notes as you read. Summarise the key issues and paraphrase the author in point form.
6. Following introductory paragraphs, note the authors reference to and the citation of other scholars. How is the writer positioning their argument within the established academic conversation in this field? This will often be framed within the literature review.
7. Be kind to yourself. Understand that academic reading can take time. Take regular breaks. Divide big tasks into smaller activities. Enjoy the journey of discovery.