



Coming to Grips With Reading and Writing Academic Articles

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This guide is intended to show you how to read and understand scholarly articles, which can help you keep up with assigned readings. And, appreciating how academics write and why they write as they do, may even improve your own papers. Nothing explored here is unique; you can find out more about any of these techniques in writing manuals in a library.

Introduction

All writing follows **conventions**. Cookbooks, letters, novels, lists, and dictionaries all depend on a *specific kind of language and presentation* to be comprehensible and easy to use. You can open any book with a plain cover, glance at the pages and, in most cases, know immediately what *kind* of book it is. We can read these conventional forms effortlessly. With practice, reading academic articles and essays can become as straightforward.

Academic disciplines, too, have conventional forms that their authors must use if other scholars are to understand what they are saying. In addition, the disciplines often govern the kind of *style* and *voice* the author must use if the article is to be acceptable to others in the same field.



For example, hard scientists are often required to emphasise the experiment and the results and downplay the contributions of the humans who conducted the experiment (i.e., “the experiment was conducted,” and “the results suggest”). Social scientists may refer to those who conducted the experiments in some sections of their reports but not in others (i.e., “the data were collected,” but “we note that”). Scholars in the humanities tend to avoid including themselves in their work but not always. These are generalities; styles can change and do. Writing in anthropology, especially ethnography, is changing, becoming more personal and less “academic.”

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Academic writing also tends to have conventional *structures*. Scientific (social and hard) papers are generally presented with clearly labeled sections that contain a discussions of the problem, the existing literature (that means the articles and books people have already published on the subject), the experiment and its design, the results, and of how the results fill a gap or improve understanding.

Humanities articles tend to use section headings less obviously but still generally contain three main sections: the introduction (which describes the background and the “problem”), the body (which explains the author’s reasoning about and evidence for the problem), and the conclusion (which summarizes the author’s answer).

Knowing that all academic articles ought to follow some fairly strict conventions in their organization and presentation is the first step in reading and understanding articles.

Recognizing these conventions can also help when it comes to *writing* in the various disciplines. Styles in writing are somewhat like styles in clothes. You wouldn’t (presumably) wear a tuxedo to work or a ballgown to a meeting, neither would you wear jeans to a formal dance. If you recognize that academic articles are written in a particular *style* or fashion, you will be able to discover what the author is saying and perhaps find ways to use it in your own academic writing.

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Getting Started

Depending on why you're reading the article, it may be useful to work from a photocopy, then you can put the article in your notebook, write notes in the margins and/or highlight important parts. Whether you do or not, however, it is useful to write down the answers to the questions that are included in each section of this guide. The resulting summary can be an enormous help when studying for an exam or preparing for a discussion of assigned readings. (To make the summarizing and notekeeping a bit easier, an Article Analysis Summary Sheet has been attached to the end of this guide. Use it if you like or make one of your own.)



The important thing to remember is that you are trying to figure out what the author is saying. Based on your grasp of the argument, you'll be able to comment on what the author has written, the way the author presented the information, and draw your own conclusions about the usefulness of the article in general or more specifically to your research or your course.

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Let's Begin

Step 1 – Consider the Article as a Whole

Examine the article as a whole. Try to determine something about the purpose, audience and content of the paper before you start reading. Look for clues in the title and/ or subtitle, the acknowledgements (if any), the first foot- or endnote, the author's biographical note (either with the article or at the front or back of the book or journal).



Some questions to guide you in considering the article as a whole:

Who is writing the article?

See if you can find out anything about the author. Check to see what other articles or books the author has written. It will give you an idea of how the article fits into the author's other works and the field in which the author is writing.

What are the author's qualifications?

Knowing these helps to define the trustworthiness, the significance, or the importance of the conclusions reached in the article. It can also signify the slant, focus or bias of the article.

What audience is the author addressing?

This is important because it affects the style, content and approach the article takes to its subject. This may be revealed by the publication (journal or book) in which the article appeared. In other instances, audience must be determined by assessing the amount of background information and unexplained references the author includes (less suggests an audience of experts, more, an audience of general readers).

What is the article about?

Look at the first couple of paragraphs; they should give you an idea of what the paper is about. The title of the article should also suggest the main point of concern of the article, the direction of the interpretation, and sometimes the time frame or period of concern. In some disciplines, an abstract will precede the text of the paper. This will give an uncritical summary of the paper's contents.

What sources does the author use?

Check the foot- or endnotes or look at the reference list. Knowing where the author got the information will tell you whether the author is looking at something new (interviews, letters, archival or government documents, etc.), taking a new look at something old (books and articles), or combining new and old and thus adding to the discussion of the subject. Looking at the sources can show if the author has concentrated on a particular kind of information or point of view.

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Step 2 – Determine the Overall Purpose, Structure and Direction of the Article

Now that you've looked at the article as a whole, start reading.



You should be able to find the author's **statement of purpose**, or **thesis statement**, before the end of the introduction. You should also be able to tell **what evidence** the author is going to use to support the position she or he has taken. The author may also explain **what limits** have been placed on the article: for example, the length of time, the geographic location, the extent of the information that's going to be used, and the theories that are going to be applied.

You should also be able to tell the author's point of view. Remember that research is not value-free, nor culturally neutral. You may be able to tell what values the author seems to be promoting.

Also look at the **conclusion**. If it's not clearly labeled, it will probably be the last two or three paragraphs. The conclusion generally doesn't have any quoted material (i.e., no references or note numbers) and should contain only the author's remarks to the reader.

It is often useful to look at the conclusion before you read the whole paper because it contains the author's summary of what has been said. If you can't quite identify the thesis (they are often not clearly stated), read the conclusion. Knowing where the author ended up is often a clue to where he or she started from. In many instances, too, the conclusion summarizes the whole paper, as should the thesis statement.

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Some questions to guide you in determining the overall purpose, structure and direction of the article:

What is the author's main point, or thesis?

Sometimes you can find this easily; the author says something like "the point of this article is to" or "in this paper I intend to show/argue that." Sometimes you have to look for a simple statement that contains some echo of the title, the same phrase or words, and some brief statements of the argument that supports the assertion: "despite what other scholars have said, I think this [whatever it is] is actually the case, because I have found this [supporting point #1], this [supporting point #2], and this [supporting point #3]."

If the paper is well-crafted, the section headings of the paper (when there are any) will contain some allusion to the supporting points.

What evidence has the author used?

This question is often answered in step one, but you should also use what the author tells you in the introduction to expand on your grasp of the evidence.

Academic papers are often “argued,” that is, constructed like an argument with a statement of what the author has figured out or thought about a particular situation or event (or whatever). Then, to persuade the reader, the author presents facts or evidence that support that position. In some ways it’s much like a courtroom trial.

A particular collection of sources (or witnesses) present information to the author (or lawyers) and the author comes to some understanding. Then the author explains how she or he came to that conclusion and points to or presents the bits of evidence that made it possible. Consider what information is not included. Was the trial fair even though a key witness was not called to testify? Has your author only let those facts that support the thesis testify in the article? How might you find out? Is the evidence “primary,” “secondary” “traditional,” or “non-traditional”?

What limits did the author place on the study?

Writers of articles rarely tackle big topics. There isn’t enough room in an article to write a history of the world or discuss big issues. Articles are generally written to advance understanding only a little bit. It may be because the subject has never been looked at before or because no one would be able to read a larger work easily (like a student’s thesis). An article usually focuses on a particular period, event, change, person, or idea and even then may be limited even more.

This may be significant if the author is trying to make generalizations about what he or she has discovered. Knowing something about education in the 1940s in Yellowknife may not tell you anything about education anywhere else or at any other time. A more general discussion of subsistence strategies over a longer period may have more general relevance. A critique of the literature in a specific field may replace having to read a number of books. With assigned readings, an article will most often be assigned as an example of a type of research, as a source of quality information on a specific topic or because it summarizes a lot of other writing on a given subject.

What is the author’s point of view?

This can sometimes be easily seen, especially in “polemical” essays, where the author

—bashes a number of arguments and then presents her or his own. It may be more difficult to tell. Sometimes you have to “feel” it out, by assessing the tone or by watching for negative or positive adjectives: “as so-and-so said in their excellent essay, ‘Nuke ‘em Now!’” or “who shows a wrongheaded insistence.” Cues like those words can help you figure out where the author is coming from.

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Step 3 –Read the Article but Pay Attention to the Writing and the Presentation

As you read, watch not only for what the author is saying, but how it is said. This step requires that you read the article to gain an understanding of how the author presents the evidence and makes it fit into the argument. At this stage of the exercise, you should also take the time to look up any unfamiliar words or concepts.

Although you are somewhat off the hook critically in this stage, you should be aware that there are tricks the author can use to make sure you’re following the argument. Some of them are standard ways to keep the author’s argument separate from the evidence. Look for clues like: “for example,” “as Professor Source said,” or “in my study area (or time), I found that.” Also, look for transition words and phrases (“however,” “despite,” “in addition,” etc.) and the various words clues writers leave when they switch from their own voice to that of their sources. Others may be less honest attempts to make you agree.

Try to take notice of the language an author will sometimes use when she or he is speculating about things or hoping you won’t realize that the evidence is weak: “it is probable or likely that,” (is it probable?) “clearly, this is so” (is it clear?), “it should be obvious by now” (is it obvious?), “this undoubtably means” (is it undoubtable?) Remember that forceful words don’t necessarily make a weak argument any more convincing.

Look, too, to see how the author switches from explaining how the evidence supports her or his argument to the summary of the paper. The last few paragraphs should tidy up the discussion, show how it all fits together neatly, point out where more research is needed, or explain how this article has advanced learning in this discipline. The conventions also require that there be some reference to the thesis statement and perhaps even an echo of the title, especially if there was a catchy phrase in it.

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Step 4 – Criticism and Evaluation of the Article

Now that you've finished reading, consider your personal reaction to it. First impressions are often "I liked it?," "It was hard to read," or "it was boring." Second thoughts should probe somewhat deeper. Thinking about what the author is trying to say, considering who he or she was addressing in the first place, attempting to identify the gap the article has been written to fill and asking other such questions is the foundation for the *critical* evaluation of the article. Even if you didn't know anything about the topic before you read the article, you can make some judgements about it and how well the author made her or his case.

Evaluation is a bit harder. In academic circles, evaluation means to judge the worth, usually by comparing a thing to some kind of standard. In the case of evaluating an article, that standard would be other articles in the same discipline or journal as the one you're reading. If you are not familiar with those other articles it may be hard to evaluate well. You can, however, do a fairly good job of it by considering the stylistic and structural *conventions* of other, similar articles. Does this one fit the pattern? Does it measure up to the academic standards of writing, presentation, organization, source citation and such? Sometimes even those questions can be hard to answer but they should be attempted. The answers will give you some ammunition for your critique.

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Some questions to guide you in critiquing and evaluating the article:

Was there anything that was left unfinished? Did the author raise questions or make points that were left orphaned in the paper?

These questions are to make you think about what was in the article and what was left out. Since, by looking at the thesis statement, you should have a good idea of what the author is going to say, you should also be able to tell if any of the points weren't explored as fully as others. In addition, in the course of the paper, the author might have raised other points to support the argument. Were all of those worked out thoroughly?

Did it make sense?

Even if you were not a member of the intended audience for the article, did it clearly present its case? If the author crafted the paper well, even if you don't have the disciplinary background, you should be able to get a sense of the argument. If you didn't, was it your reading or the author's craft that caused problems?

What does the point made by the argument mean in or to the larger context of the discipline and of contemporary society?

This is a question that directs you to think about the implications of the article. Academic articles are intended to advance knowledge, a little bit at a time. They are never (or hardly ever) written just to summarize what we know now. Even the summary articles tend to argue that there are holes in the fabric of knowledge and someone ought to do studies to plug those gaps. So, where does this particular article fit in? Can real people improve their lives with this information? Does this increase the stock of information for other scholars? These sorts of questions are important for appreciating the article you're looking at and for fitting it into your own knowledge of the subject.

Is the organization of the article clear? Does it reflect the organization of the thesis statement? *It should.*

Does the author's disciplinary focus lead her or him to ignore other ideas?

Were there any problems with grammar, sentence structure, or word usage?

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Conclusion

This step-by-step guide has tried to present a useful way to approach reading an article. The answers to the questions included in each section should give you more than enough "data" to write a solid review of the article and, even if you don't have to write a formal review, completing the analysis sheet will give you a good record of the contents of the article and your assessment of it to serve as a study aid when it comes to exam time.

The other stated purpose of this guide was to help you see that all academic articles have a repeating and predictable way of being presented (the *convention*). You can adopt these conventions in your own papers and ask the questions at each step as a way to test whether your own papers correspond to the convention.

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Further Resources:

American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Fourth Edition. Washington, DC: APA, 1994.

Gibaldi, Joseph, and Walter S. Achert. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Third Edition. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1988.

Johnson, Jean. *The Bedford Guide to the Research Process*. Second Edition. Boston: Bedford Books, St. Martin's Press, 1992.

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