

A Guide to Reading and Analysing Academic Articles

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This guide aims to show you how to read and understand scholarly articles, a skill that is virtually guaranteed to help you keep up with assigned readings. Appreciating how academics write and why they write as they do may even improve your own papers. Nothing explored here is unique; you can easily find out more about any of these techniques in writing manuals or academic skills guides. I originally wrote this in 1997 and have changed fairly little of the good stuff (fixed a few errors, found a few typos). Mainly I've played with the format and updated the references. This version is the latest look (last fiddled in January 2012) but it varies little from the web version.

Introduction

All writing follows CONVENTIONS.† Cookbooks, letters, novels, lists, and dictionaries all depend on specific kinds of language and presentation to be comprehensible and easy to use. Because of these conventions of writing, one may 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 and use conventional forms of material effortlessly, or at least with less effort. 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.”

Academic writing also tends to have conventional STRUCTURES. Scientific (social and hard) papers are generally presented with clearly labeled sections that contain a discussion 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.

† Words in the text set in small capital letters are defined in the glossary at the end of this document (see pages 10-11).

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.

Let’s Get Started

Depending on why you’re reading the article or chapter, it may be easier 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.

Remember that you are trying to figure out what the author is saying. Based on your grasp of his, her or their argument, you’ll be able to comment on the text, the content, and the way the information is presented, and draw your own conclusions about the usefulness of the article in general or more specifically to your research or your course.

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 author affiliation or address, 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?

What can you find out about the author from the paper in front of you? Look for name, credentials, affiliation, etc. If you can, find 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. There should be some indication with the article, i.e., university or research affiliation, or company. Look for any clues at the beginning or end of the article. The usual places for author notes are footnotes on the first page or after the end of the article before the notes/bibliography or reference list. In some journals or collections they'll be in a separate section which might not have been copied with the article.

What audience is the author addressing?

Who is the article for? This question is supremely important because the audience for a piece of writing 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. You can get an idea by looking at the reference list or by skimming the first couple of paragraphs. The first couple of paragraphs, by convention, will contain the rationale for the research that's being reported. You'll get an idea of the audience level from identifying the scope of the paper's focus. In general, the more specific and detailed the focus, the more specific and expert the audience.

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. If the paper has been well crafted, they will establish 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 (if it's been properly written) give an uncritical summary of the paper's contents.

Another good place to look for a quick summary of the article or chapter is the

conclusion. Often longer than the introduction, maybe two to four paragraphs depending on the length of the piece, the conclusion should summarize the argument and place it in a larger context.

What sources does the author use?

Check the foot- or endnotes or look at the reference list. Knowing where the author got the information and what sources were used 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.

Step 2 – Determine the purpose, structure and direction of the article

Now that you've looked at the article as a whole, start reading. Try for a level of engagement between reading and skimming.

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 or period, 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 embodies or promotes.

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.

Some questions to guide you in determining the 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 the presentation of a case in 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 points, truisms or arguments and then presents her or his own. Or it could 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.

Step 3 – Read the article; pay attention to writing and 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. (More transitions at <http://bit.ly/5OZ6g7> at St. Cloud State University's Write Place.)

Consider the “level” of various sentences and paragraphs. At the top, you will find the general, expansive or sweeping statements that establish location or facts that will be used subsequently in the paper. Beware of generalizations that are unsupported by either examples or actual references in a note or in-text parenthetical citation. Unsupported generalizations are a symptom of sloppy thinking, especially

when the author hopes you'll just agree without asking what evidence there is for these statements.

Middle-level sentences summarize or discuss the situation in terms of specifics that have been presented in the paper. The deepest level of discussion is the narrowest; it deals with specifics, the events or situations or artifacts that lead to more general conclusions. Be aware of the level at which the author is addressing you. It should begin with the general, descend into the mid-level, fluctuate from the narrowest to the general through the paper as necessary to ensure the reader is following the argument, and then should conclude on the general.

Take notice of the language authors will sometimes use when they are 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.

Step 4 – Criticism and evaluation of the article

Now that you've finished reading, consider your personal reaction to it. First impressions are often superficial: "I liked it," or "It was hard to read." First impressions are usually opinions and not particularly reasoned. They can be useful in that those opinions can be a starting point, but remember that they are your own, personal, reactions to the effort of the task of reading the article. Rarely are your first impressions the best evaluation you can give of the article or title. Dense or technically complex is not necessarily bad and easy-to-read is not necessarily anything more than a nice summary.

Second thoughts should probe quite a bit more deeply. Thinking about what the author is trying to say, considering who he or she was addressing in the first place, identifying 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.

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 its case?

Even if you were not a member of the intended audience for the article, did the article 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 fit-

ting 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 be and it should. Go back and check if you're not sure.

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

This sort of thing may be hard to determine on the face, but ask if the author has adequately supported his or her interpretation of the evidence? Are there any other explanations that you can think of? Have you read anything else on the same subject that contradicts or supports with this author is saying?

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

Even if you're not very good at writing or grammar, did you notice errors in the paper? Errors may not necessarily be the author's fault. Editors prepare the text for publication; they should have worked with the author to fix any errors. Some spelling problems may well be typos. Word usage problems typically originate with the author and persist through the editing process. Sloppy editing can suggest possibly hurried peer review, a worrying inattention to detail, and even hasty publication. These are very serious flaws in an academic work; the type of work needs to be clearly established for just this sort of reason.

What did you learn? What are you going to do with this information?

Most of this document is about the author and how you might suck every last nuance out of a published academic work. The point of the whole academic writing enterprise is to put information out into the environment to advance scholarship. The goal of authors is to have you read their work and find something useful, interesting, intriguing or even controversial in their ideas, interpretations or findings. Will you change your mind about anything as a result of reading this article? Does it improve your understanding of something you're studying? What does this information mean to you?

Conclusion

This step-by-step guide gives 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 an analysis sheet will give you a record of the contents of the article and your assessment of it to serve as either a study aid when it comes to

exam time or ammunition for a seminar discussion.

The other stated purpose of this guide is 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 nicely to the convention.

Further Resources

(examples; your instructor or professor can point you to disciplinary resources)

American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. Sixth edition. Washington, DC: APA, 2009. (Be sure you're using the most recent. See <http://apastyle.apa.org/>)

Gibaldi, Joseph, and Walter S. Achert. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Seventh edition. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009. See <http://www.mla.org/style> and <http://www.mlahandbook.org/>

Kilborn, Judith. "LEO Transition Cues." Web page. Last updated 5 October. St. Cloud, MN: Write Place, St. Cloud State University, 1999. <http://bit.ly/5OZ6g7> or <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/style/transitioncues.html>

Turabian, Kate L., Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Seventh Edition: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers* (Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

York University Academic Writing Guide, collection:

<http://www.library.yorku.ca/ccm/rg/preview/academic-writing-guide.en>

Glossary

Convention: General (often implicit) consent; practice based on this; accepted social behaviour especially if artificial or formal; accepted method of conduct used to convey information (*Oxford Concise Dictionary*).

Critiquing: This activity is not limited to noting what's wrong or bad about an article or accomplished by trying to justify your opinion of the article. Critiquing a piece of writing involves considering what the author has either told you or implies she or he is going to do (prove, explain, interpret) in the article and evaluating how well or not the author has done so. A critique can also serve to explain to its readers in what ways the article advances knowledge in the field (or not). In this context, it means an evaluative, thoughtful overview of literature (articles and books) in a particular field.

Implications: What we mean when we talk about implications in this context, is the larger meaning that the research or the idea the author has presented might have. When academics conduct and write about research, they intend it to make a difference, even if it's only in a small

way. What might a reader do with the results or the new knowledge presented in the paper?

Looking things up: Part of the academic experience involves coming up against new or unfamiliar terms or words. The best way to expand your grasp of the subject you're studying is to look things up in dictionaries, textbook glossaries or encyclopedias. Believe me, there is no shame in using a reference book or site. It's an accepted, and expected, academic activity. It may be helpful to develop a personal glossary as you read; keep a list of words or concepts you've looked up.

Non-traditional evidence: I'm using this term to mean those sources of information that have generally not been considered "appropriate" by most academics. This is becoming a matter of great concern, especially in the social sciences and such multidisciplinary fields as Women's Studies, First Nations Studies, or Northern Studies. In these fields, personal histories, oral testimony, biographies, even the researcher's own thoughts and experiences of the research are now being used more and more, leading to debate about the "quality," "bias" or "appropriateness" of such sources.

Primarily evidence: Facts and details that have been drawn from documents rather than from other, more recent, explanatory articles or books. The main distinction is that primary materials are the documents or other non-text evidence (incl., newspapers, media programs, interviews, coins, etc.) that are produced at the time. (Also often referred to as "primary sources.")

Secondary evidence: Information that has been drawn from other articles, magazines, or books rather than from the original documents, often located in archives. The usual distinction is that secondary evidence usually involves someone's interpretation of primary sources. There is a potential complication, however: Depending on how an author uses the evidence, articles, books, newspapers, radio or TV programs can be either primary or secondary sources for an article.

Structure: Manner in which a building or other complete whole [like an academic paper] is constructed, supporting framework or whole of the essential parts of something (the structure of a poem, sentence, etc.) (*Oxford Concise Dictionary*).

Style: Refers to the way a writer expresses his or her ideas. *Oxford Concise Dictionary*: "manner of writing, speaking, or doing, in contrast to the matter to be expressed or thing done; collective characteristics of the writing or diction or way of presenting things."

Thesis: According to *The Writer's Brief Handbook*, a thesis is "a controlling idea." The authors (Rosa, Eschholz and Roberts) explain that "The thesis is often expressed in one or two sentences called a thesis statement" (13). An article's thesis statement is usually in the first or second paragraphs, after some description or discussion of the article's context or the gaps in the discipline's knowledge the article is addressing.

Traditional evidence: I'm using this term to mean the expected sources of information agreed upon by the discipline. As an example, historians are expected to use documents from the time (letters, diaries, government documents, newspapers, etc.). Social scientists draw from a different tradition and often use data generated by large, anonymous surveys as evidence. There is, of course, no real limit to such evidence. In general, "traditional evidence" is evidence (data) that is thought of as somehow value-free, which the author then interprets or explains.

Voice: A component of style that refers to choices of words and sentence structures that create the "sound" of the author's speech in your mind when you read; using some slang words may create a conversational tone. Sticking to more impersonal and formal vocabulary and complete sentences results in a lecturing or explaining tone.