How to Read Articles in Academic or Scholarly Journals

Dissecting the Parts of a Research Article

With most college papers, you need to use sources from scholarly journals. But the peer-reviewed articles in these academic journals can be dense and difficult to read. After all, they’re written for experts in the field. So what’s a student to do? You don’t have to read the entire article to get the information you need. Scholarly articles are generally broken into these sections: abstract, introduction, literature review, methods, data, results, conclusion, and bibliography. If you’re fortunate, the articles may even use these exact titles to label each section. By knowing the point of each section, you'll find what you need quickly and without being bogged down by the convoluted language in these academic journal articles.

Abstract

This is the summary of the journal article. Almost all journal articles have an abstract. The abstract appears as a short paragraph at the start of the article, sometimes italicized or indented to set itself apart from the rest of the article.

What’s important: The abstract tells you the point of the article. Always read the abstract to make sure the article is suited toward your paper's topic.

Introduction

The writer's introduction is (obviously) the first section of the paper. It generally introduces the topic, the thesis, and tells readers why the research is important.

What’s important: Look for the thesis; what's the author trying to prove or show? How do they intend to contribute to their field? Read
the first and last paragraph of the introduction; the thesis is oftentimes located there. If you cannot find the thesis in those two places, you may have to scan the whole introduction.

**Literature Review (or "A Review of the Literature")**

A literature review looks at past research on the author's thesis. The literature review demonstrates to other researchers that the author is thoroughly acquainted with their topic.

*What's important:* If you're still searching for sources for your paper, a literature review can point you to other sources you can use. It can also broadly educate you on this area of research. If you're not looking for more research and you have a good grasp on the material, feel free to skip over this section.

**Methods**

In this section, the author details how they will try to support (or disprove) their thesis.

*What's important:* You should know how the writer obtained their information and explain that in your paper. Did they use a survey? What type of survey? Who did they survey? Or did they do an experiment? What type of experiment? How did they get test subjects?

For an ordinary college paper, you most likely don't need to know the more complex matters such as whether the writer uses a one-way or two-way ANOVA or other statistical analyses.

**Data**

All the data the author collected from their research is located in this section.

*What's important:* The section's importance depends on your paper. Sometimes, you'll want to skip this section entirely. If you're interested in a specific point of the author's research (and which is unlikely to be covered by the author in the conclusion) or are interested in replicating the research, then you may want to check out
Results

The author explains the results of the data.

*What's important:* Like the data section, this section can be skipped over depending on your interests. The conclusion's section should be the final is-my-thesis-right-or-wrong statement, and the conclusion is usually clearer than the results section. If the article's conclusion doesn't satisfy you, *then* you may want to look at the results section.

Conclusion

The author's summary of the journal article. The author will also explain whether his or her thesis is correct, the implications, and what other research can be done.

*What's important:* This section is vital. If you use this article as a source, you better know the general outcome of the author's research. Was it proven wrong? Right? Inconclusive? You can always turn to the results section if you can't find the answers you're looking for here.

Bibliography/Works Cited

The bibliography is the list of sources the author has used.

*What's important:* If you're in need of more sources, take a glance through the titles of this section. You may find articles you can use in your paper.