How to read a journal article

When reading a journal article, most people start at the beginning and read word for word, until they eventually arrive at the end. This is not a terrible strategy, but you may get bogged down in all of the psychology language and lose interest – or HOPE! So, here are a few tips for how to read a piece of original research.

Start with the title

You can learn a lot about a piece of research just from the title. The title should present a concise statement of the issue being investigated and the variables that were studied - for example, Sad and guilty? Affective influences on the explanation of conflict in close relationships. (Forgas, 1994, p 56).

Just by reading the title we know that the study is about how emotional states change the way people explain conflict in close relationships. It also suggests that when feeling sad, people accept more personal blame for such conflicts – i.e., they feel more guilty.

Read the abstract

The abstract is a brief summary of the study. It is usually a maximum of 150 words. The abstract contains information about how the problem was investigated, the major findings of the study, and hints at implications.

The title and abstract of a research report are like a movie preview. A movie preview highlights the important aspects of a movie's plot, and provides just enough information for one to decide whether to watch the whole film. Titles and abstracts highlight the key features of a research report and let you decide if you want to read the whole paper. But just as with movie previews, they do not give the whole story. It is never enough to just read the abstract.

Read the introduction

The introduction explains why the reader should care about the problem being studied. More importantly, the introduction clearly identifies the research question and the researcher’s hypothesis. Though a lot of the background information may be interesting, it may not be so relevant to understanding the study. It may, however, give you ideas of studies for further research. You can use the references to help find more studies relevant to the topic.

While reading the introduction, ask yourself these three questions

- What problem was studied and why?
- What questions does the researcher hope to answer with this study?
- What is the hypothesis of this study?
Read the Method section

The method section includes the design of the study (independent samples, repeated measures, or a qualitative approach). It will also describe the sample and procedure. When reading through this section, make note of the following:

- What research method was used? (Interviews, experiment, correlation)
- What was the independent variable? How was it defined and measured?
- What was the dependent variable? How was it measured?
- Is there anything important to note about the nature of the sample?
- Was the study done under highly controlled conditions or in a natural environment?

Finally, you should be able to summarize the procedure. This does not mean that you need to know every detail – this can be found in the study itself. Could you write a two to three sentence summary of what the researchers actually did?

Read the results section

This section is often considered the most daunting. Many people do not understand statistics, so the temptation is to skip this section. Here are some tips to make it easier:

- Look at the data tables. What do they appear to say about the study?
- Look at the graphs. How do they say about the findings?
- There is always a narrative explanation of the findings. Find the statement of significance. Did the results support the research hypothesis?

Read the discussion

The discussion section often opens with a summary of what the study found and evaluation of whether the findings supported the original hypothesis. If the research hypothesis was not supported consider the researchers’ explanation as to why it was not supported. Does this seem reasonable to you? Some readers find it useful to read the first few paragraphs of the discussion section before reading any other part of the research report. Like the abstract, these few paragraphs usually contain all of the main ideas of the report:

- What were the hypotheses?
- What were the major findings and did they support the hypotheses?
- How do the findings relate to past research?

When you have finished reading through the important sections, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What conclusions can be drawn from the study?
- What were the strengths and limitations of the study?
- What are the implications of the study?