

Reading Journal Articles

Introduction

A journal article is a written paper that has been published in a specialist journal. A journal is an academic publication circulated at regular intervals during the year. Each journal usually contains a number of articles and is organised into numbered volumes for each year so it is important to note the title of the journal, the year it was published and its volume and issue number (Cottrell, 2019).

Articles are good quality sources of research written by experts and are essential reading for university study. Reading journal articles will help you develop a greater understanding of your subject. Articles can be found in print or electronically via the University of Bedfordshire's database **Discover**.

Understanding how journal articles are structured will help you find the relevant sections and get the most out of them. Journal articles always need to be referenced using your faculty guidelines to show you have read widely and used reliable sources to support your assignments. Search for your referencing scheme here.

<https://lrweb.beds.ac.uk/a-guide-to-referencing/referencing-schemes/>

Glossary

Not all the following terms appear in all articles but they are common.

- **Abstract** - A short summary including the aim, design and key findings of a study.
- **Discussion** - Usually found in research articles, this section presents a summary of the main findings and an analysis of the results. Comparisons might be made with existing literature and strengths and limitations might be identified.

- **Ethics / Ethical issues** - A system of accepted beliefs based on morals. Usually refers to the way research data is collected, handled and published.
 - **Hypothesis** - A statement that is used to drive research. It is a claim that can either be tested or explored in order to gain a better understanding of a topic.
 - **Issue number** - The number given to a particular edition of a journal. Usually found on the front page next to the volume number e.g. volume 26 issue 4 26(4). The volume and issue number need to be included in the reference list.
 - **Methodology / Study design** - Describes the methods used to collect the evidence, for example, interviews or questionnaires.
 - **Model** - A structured framework or tool to measure or interpret findings
 - **Peer-reviewed** - Experts have reviewed an article to ensure it follows appropriate research methods, is accurate and avoids misleading results.
 - **Research** - A study testing a new hypothesis or re-visiting a set of previous studies.
 - **Theory** - A structured set of ideas that guide thinking.
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Types of journal articles

There are five main types of journal articles. Below is a list, from Springer (2019).

1. **Original research** - The most common type of article used to publish research findings. Also called primary research or original articles.
2. **Review articles** - Look at a summary of several research studies on a specific topic and present a view on the current state of that topic. They present a full introduction to the topic. These articles can also be referred to as systematic literature reviews.

3. **Case Studies** - This type of article presents a localised picture of new or innovative practices. Introducing novel approaches that can be trialled by future researchers.
 4. **Methodologies / Methods** - These articles can either present new methods, tests or models or comment on improvements to an existing method.
 5. **Short reports or Letters** - These articles refer to the editor's comments on interesting or significant data from original research in order to stimulate further research. These can be found in rapidly changing areas such as medicine.
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Structure of journal articles

Each journal has a selection of different articles within one edition which is why you need to add information on the page numbers within a volume to your reference.

A typical research journal article is structured using the following sub-headings

- **Keywords** – a list of subject-specific terms used in the article. These can be used in further searches to find other related journal articles.
- **Introduction** – sets a context for the research and includes the hypothesis and aim of a study. Examines the background to a study and any previous literature on the topic (sometimes called a 'Literature Review'). Identifies any theoretical models that have been used. Builds a justification for why the research has been undertaken.
- **Methodology** – this describes the way the researchers have collected their data which can be either quantitative (concerned with numbers and can be easily measured) or qualitative (concerned with attitudes, feelings, experiences). Some studies used mixed methods research where both types of data are collected and combined. This may also include participant details and any ethical considerations.
- **Findings / results** – a descriptive account of the findings, identifying any trends or topics that emerge. For quantitative research, researchers will typically

undertake statistical tests or further analysis to establish any significant trends in the data that has been collected. This can be presented in a table and reported statistically using percentages (%) and presented using terms such as mean, median and mode to identify the average, mid-range and most frequently occurring results.

- **Discussion** – here the researchers make sense of the findings and offer possible reasons why. They evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study and link the findings to the literature discussed in their introduction. The discussion might also identify suggestions for further research. A good piece of research will identify the limitations of a study.
- **Conclusion** – this is where the authors will draw conclusions based on the results. Sometimes recommendations will also be included.
- **Reference list** – refers to all the papers cited within the article you are reading. This can be a good place to look for further reading on your topic.

Task

In the early stages of reading journal articles, make notes systematically using either:

- **‘Read Right’ questioning** (adapted from Wason and Southall, 2016) - see page 5
- **Journal article reading prompt questions** (adapted from University of Buffalo, 2012) – see page 6.

Use skim reading strategies to read the first and last sentences of the relevant sections of an article to get an overview and understand what it is about.

Use scan reading strategies to look quickly for specific information such as keywords or data.

‘Read Right’ questioning (Wason and Southall, 2016)

<p>Stage One: Read the title of the journal article</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask yourself how relevant is this to my topic? If relevant, note the journal title, authors' names (and disciplines) and where you found the article.
<p>Stage Two: "Top and tail" the article</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Read the abstract, introduction and conclusions only to further assess whether it meets your needs. If relevant, note what it is generally about.
<p>Stage Three: Consider how is the material organised?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How has the article been broken down into smaller chunks? List sub-headings. Predict what you are expecting to see in each section.
<p>Stage Four: Structure your notes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use the following key headings to help you structure your notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are the key topics or themes? ○ What models or theories does it refer to? ○ Who developed them and when? ○ What do these models help you to understand? ○ What examples does it use to illustrate these models or theories? ○ Note any words you do not understand and look them up.
<p>Stage Five: Summarise the main points using your own words.</p>	

Journal Article Reading Prompt Questions (adapted from University of Buffalo, 2012)

The following questions guide you to examine the content of a research article through looking at some specific areas.

What is the journal reference?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Harvard example: Author, A. A., (year) 'title of article' <i>Title of journal</i>, volume number: (issue number) pages.
Where did you locate the article?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For example via Discover; Google Scholar.
What does the abstract tell you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What was the main idea and there are examples?
What was the main purpose of the study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What was the main idea and there are examples?
Do the authors define any subject-specific terms?	
What is the study design?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Who are the population involved? How many participants took part? What tools are used to measure responses?
What are the main findings/results?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are the results and were any of these statistically significant?
Are there any strengths / limitations of the work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Was the review of previous literature thorough? Was the sample (number of participants) sufficient?
Further research / implications?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What questions do you have after reading the article? What further research do you need to do?

References

Cottrell, S. (2019) *The Study Skills Handbook* 5th edn. London: Red Globe Press
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University of Buffalo School of Social Work (2012) *Journal Article Reading Template*
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Wason, H. and Southall, J. (2016) *Critical Thinking Skills Toolkit Student Guide*
pp.13-15 [unpublished] (Available from: Kingston University)

Further information

Study Hub@Library provides a range of opportunities for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information, visit the [Study Hub Website](#).

Other related Study Hub guides in the reading series include:

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