

7-step guide to reading research articles

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All of you have read short stories. Some of them managed to captivate your attention with an appealing idea and to remain in your memory for a long time. Just as a short story is a basic unit for sharing ideas in fiction writing, an article is a short story for exchanging ideas in scholarly writing. Yet, few scholars read them through from the beginning to the end, as you usually read a fiction story. These notes will give you a few tips on how to read research articles, so that you can reproduce and use their content at the exam. You can also use the 7-step guide to prioritize between the different sections of an article when you have little time for reading it.

1. Start reading an article with an abstract: give your article a short but attentive glance.

As you read any story you try to understand what is going on and why it matters. When you read a fiction story you need to discover the answers to these two questions as you read along. In crime stories the answers to these questions may be disclosed only on the last pages. A research article is very different: the main idea or 'argument' of the article is presented right in the beginning. The abstract will tell you *what* the researchers studied, *why* it made sense to study it, *how* they studied it, and *so what they found out*. Once you have read the abstract, try to 'translate' the scholarly language into your own words. Just as in a fiction story, there will be *main characters* in a research article or '*actors*'. In organisation studies these are usually managers and employees, or whole organisations. Just as there is a *main conflict* in fiction, there is a *puzzle* or a *problem* every article addresses. Since the abstract is usually very short, read it once again after you translated its content into an everyday language.

2. Read the introduction: shake hands with your article before getting to know it better.

Reading the introduction after the abstract is a good idea because it is not an easy task to understand the main what? /how? /and so, what? of the article just from the abstract. Abstracts are often very, very dry: researchers have only a few sentences to tell everything about the article. In the introduction, researchers tell you more about the *puzzle* of the article and tell you which *theory and concepts* they will use, when they study it. If you have very little time for reading an article, you may consider skipping the introduction and going straight to the conclusion.

3. Jump straight to the conclusion: get the message right away.

Yes, jump over the sections on theory, methods and analysis and read the conclusion. Researchers are impatient people who read a lot. When they read an article, they have a large bright bulb blinking, with the words "*and so, what?*" on it. Be like them. Read the message of the article before familiarising yourself with its details. Since a scientific article is not a crime story, you will not destroy the pleasure of reading the rest of it. On the contrary, you will understand the final destination of the journey the researcher is telling about. Instead of destroying the fun, knowing the conclusion will be like having a light guiding you through the 'forest' - a complex text packed with words, some of which you may not even know.

4. Read the analysis: learn about the researcher's journey to the conclusion.

Now that you already know how the story ends, you might ask yourself: why reading the analysis section? There are two good reasons for this. One is that the more details you learn about the *actors* of the article and the *puzzle*, the better you understand the problem that the researcher addresses and her solution to it. The other reason is that the main task of your academic education is developing your *analytic competences*. You need to learn how other researchers do the analysis in order to be able to do the same in your exam assignments and final projects, be it a bachelor or a master thesis. *Analytic competencies* will help you retell scholarly stories and to write them in your exam assignments.

Whether you decide to read the analysis section or not, go through the *subheadings* in this section to get the road map of the territory you found yourself in. This will make it much easier for you to read this section if you decide to do so.

5. Read the theory section: learn more about the puzzle and how other researchers resolved it earlier.

The theory section is likely to be the most demanding one in terms of reading time spent per line as well as in terms of your concentration. It will lift the plot of the story in the article to a more abstract level and relate it to other similar plots already written. In this section you will not read how things work in practice, but instead, you will encounter a lot of difficult abstract concepts. If you do not give up, you will be rewarded by creating a more complex picture of social processes and the world in your mind. Social phenomena in organisations will become multifaceted and nuanced. The more theoretical sections you read, the easier it will be for you to use the theoretical concepts in your talks and written assignments. You will be able to tell a story about one organisation in a language that will make it relevant for a broad range of organisations.

6. Read the methodology: evaluate the researcher's basis for making the conclusion.

Research is not fiction. It must tell something about reality, even though this may be a subjective reality or several different subjective perspectives. From the methodology section you will learn how researchers studied this reality. Some researchers use qualitative methods and try to understand what is going on in and between organisations. Others – attempt to measure reality: they use quantitative methods to tell stories about organisations. Still others aim at analysing other researchers' ideas and articles instead of conducting their own 'empirical' study. You can judge yourself how convincing these methods are.

7. Finetune the way you read articles to discover what works best for yourself.

The more active role you take when reading an article, the easier it will be to remember it. You can start by following this guide and read just the *abstract and conclusion* in a couple of articles. You will see, that this will create some familiarity with the articles. If you want to understand the articles better though, follow the sequence of *abstract, introduction and conclusion*. If you want to be able to use the articles in your own written assignment, you need to read more sections. Pay attention to what sequence of steps works best for you. Make notes in the articles – electronic or hand-written – relating the article to your own experiences and expressing your feelings about different paragraphs. You can even use both happy and bored smileys.

To conclude, being good at reading articles is a competence that is crucial for performing well at a university. Yet, the answer to the question about how to read a research article is less trivial than many students might think. When you read your next article, pay attention not only to *what* you are reading but also to *how* you are reading it. The time you will spend on becoming better at reading articles is a great investment into your future knowledge and exams grades.