

Academic Reading Journal Articles

Often in the course of researching for an assignment, project or dissertation you'll be expected to deal with a large quantity of reading – books, conference papers or journal articles. See the '[Academic Reading](#)' guide for some general notes, but this guide is aimed at helping you through the process of quickly managing a lot of journal articles. The principles apply to conference papers as well.

0. Overview

Take a quick look at the article in its entirety. How many pages is it? Is it dense with figures, equations, or illustrations? This will give you an idea of how much time you may need to devote to it. You may find that it's poorly written or written at a level that's too difficult to read and you would be better reading other articles. You should also be able to establish whether you're looking at primary literature – an article presenting new findings, research, survey results etc; or secondary literature – book reviews, editorials, literature reviews and so on.



Think about why you're reading the article. Are you looking for ideas for a topic to cover in an assignment or dissertation? Or are you looking for evidence to support arguments you're making? This may well affect how long you wish to devote to skimming or reading an article.

1. Title

Look at the title of the article – usually a journal article title will be quite detailed and informative. Is it really covering what you need to read? Does it have a subtitle? If it's not relevant, move on to something more useful; if it's tangentially relevant consider saving it for another time.

2. Journal Title and 3. Other bibliographic information

Look at the rest of the bibliographic information.

Author – is this a recognized name in your subject area? Are there multiple authors implying a research team? Is there information about where they're from or where they're researching? (In the example above, look just under the author's name.) All of this can give you some context concerning the paper.

Journal title – is it a very wide ranging and perhaps prestigious journal (e.g. *Nature*) or something very specialized (e.g. the one in the example)? Even information such as the volume number might give clues as to whether this is a new journal title or something long established. Again, it will give you some context.



Date – how old is the article? Still relevant? Latest research? A seminal or ‘classic’ paper you can’t afford to ignore? Note, of course, that this bibliographic information is useful for your referencing. (Take care if printing or saving an electronic copy that you’ve captured all this information – particularly older documents may not include it within the article. Be careful if photocopying a print version, that you’ve got the page numbers as well.)

4. Look for an abstract

Often you can save yourself a lot of time by reading an abstract to discover the article isn’t something that is actually useful for your research at all. You may not even need to find the full text of the article as the abstract may be freely available online or contained within the indexing database you’re searching. The abstract will also help you to skim read the entire article as you’ll have a better understanding of the paper’s outline. Also, use the subheadings for this skimming and the labels of any illustrations or figures. (Note, that if you’ve found the article in a database, the abstract may have your search terms highlighted which can make it even quicker to see if it’s relevant.)

5. Look for keywords

Many articles will have keywords assigned to them, sometimes by the author, sometimes by the editors of the journal, or sometimes by the database indexers. (You’ll find the latter in the database you searched to find the article rather than in the article itself.) These keywords can be useful in two ways: Firstly, the keywords will again give you clues as to what the article is about and whether you need to read it. Secondly, they can provide ideas for search terms you may not have thought of when you go on to search for similar material.

6. Actively reading

If all the above indicates that the article might be worth reading, set aside time to actively read it – making notes about content, or quotes you think might be useful, or key figures or charts that you might want to reference. Look for structure such as an introduction, a methodology, a ‘discussion’ or a conclusion or other sub-headings which will guide you around. Sometimes reading just the discussion or the conclusion is sufficient. Think critically about what you’re reading: is it biased for some reason? Just presenting one side of an argument? (You may be able to tell this from the author affiliation or from the text itself.)

Ensure that your notes have all the bibliographic information you need so you can easily reference the item if you choose or come back to the article if you need to check some detail or other.

You may also wish to consider practicalities such as whether you prefer to read printouts, read on a PC screen, or read using a tablet. For electronic reading, many articles will now be in PDF form like this guide. Don’t forget that the software or apps you are using may allow you to highlight, annotate or bookmark a PDF.

7. References

At the end of the article you may find a reference list. If the article you’ve just read is relevant for your research, look at this closely to see if there are references to follow up. You will need to learn to ‘read’ references to tell if they are book material, conference proceedings, journal articles and so on. They won’t necessarily be in a referencing style you’re used to. You may have to decipher journal title abbreviations if you want to find an article. Remember that to see if the Library holds a particular journal you will need to search for the journal title (not the article title); and you will need to search both the [catalogue](#) and the [Publications search page](#) to be sure we don’t have it. Remember that if we don’t have something you’ve found, we can usually get it via [Inter Library Loan](#).

Further Reading

Lindquist, D.W. (2005). How to improve technical reading skills, *Potentials*, 24(3), 14-15. doi: 10.1109/MP.2005.1502499

Discursive look at various skills and various other works which can help improve academic reading. Bonus points for a relevant Star Trek reference.

Subramanyam, R. (2013). Art of reading a journal article: Methodically and effectively. *Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology: JOMFP*, 17(1), 65-70. doi:10.4103/0973-029X.110733

Although aimed at the medical profession, a very helpful and useful article which includes a flowchart for deciding whether to read an article or not.

You should be able to find both the above using our Discovery search tool.

