

Reading Scholarly Sources Effectively: Journal Articles

Social Sciences and STEM

Whether you are writing a research paper, an annotated bibliography, or preparing an academic presentation, these tasks require you to read **scholarly journal articles**. You can use scholarly journal articles to follow the latest developments in a field of study or trace the trajectory of an idea or author. To assess the impact of an article on the scholarly community, check whether it has been cited in other works (e.g. use the “cited by” option in Scopus or Google Scholar).

A typical structure of a journal article in social sciences and STEM includes the following: Abstract, Introduction, Method and Procedure, Results, Discussion, and References.

How to Read Journal Articles in Social Sciences and STEM

Think about your goals. Are you **scanning** an article to identify content relevant to your research topic? Or, are you **reading to understand** the arguments in the article and use it in your writing?

Effective scanning of content is an important part of the research process. Scanning is superficial reading that allows you to gather relevant sources for deeper investigation. Scan content by taking a broad view of the article:

- Read the abstract, introduction, and conclusion to assess relevance for your topic;
- Review any figures, diagrams or statistics to assess whether your technical knowledge is adequate to understand the content; and
- Browse references for sources or authors you recognize and for additional sources relevant to your research question.

Reading to understand requires a much greater time commitment and several passes over the article. In-depth reading requires that you think critically about the content and its context.

- What research method(s) are used in the article? Is it an observational study, such as a cohort or case study, an experimental study, such as a randomized controlled trial, or a meta-analysis of other studies?
- Are the article’s findings and conclusion valid?
- How does the article contribute to its field of study?
- Where does the article fit within other sources you have been reading on the topic?
- How does the article help you answer your research question?
- Make note of and follow up on relevant references.

This handout borrows ideas from: Keshav, S. (2016). *How to read a paper*. Retrieved from <http://blizzard.cs.uwaterloo.ca/keshav/home/Papers/data/07/paper-reading.pdf>

Reading Scholarly Sources Effectively: Journal Articles

Humanities

Whether you are writing a research paper, an annotated bibliography, or preparing an academic presentation, these tasks require you to read **scholarly journal articles**. You can use scholarly journal articles to follow the latest developments in a field of study or trace the trajectory of an idea or author.

A typical structure of a journal article in the humanities includes the following:
Abstract, Introduction, Main Body (with or without headings), Conclusion, and References.

How to Read Journal Articles in the Humanities

Think about your goals. Are you **scanning** an article to identify content relevant to your research topic? Or, are you **reading to understand** the arguments in the article and use it in your writing?

Effective scanning of content is an important part of the research process. Scanning is superficial reading that allows you to gather relevant sources for deeper investigation. Scan content by taking a broad view of the article:

- Read the abstract, introduction, conclusion, and note any headings and sub-headings to assess relevance for your topic;
- Find the article's thesis or main argument;
- Browse references for sources or authors you recognize and for additional sources relevant to your research question.

Reading to understand requires a much greater time commitment and several passes over the article. In-depth reading requires that you think critically about the content and its context:

- What research method(s) are used in the article? Is the article's approach based on a case study, life history research, comparative history, quantitative research, source criticism, critical discourse analysis or other methodologies?
- Does the evidence effectively support the article's arguments?
- How does the article contribute to its field of study?
- How does the article's theoretical "lens" compare with other scholars' approaches to this topic?
- How does the article help you answer your research question?
- Make note of and follow up on relevant references.

This handout borrows ideas from: Keshav, S. (2016). *How to read a paper*.
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