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LDS “How to” series: Interpreting Academic Articles

What is critical reading?

Reading academic articles can be tough. They often have a large amount of technical vocabulary, as well as organization and structure that are not found in other works. Beyond simply reading the article, we are often asked to interpret the article. This is where critical reading comes in.

Critical reading involves asking yourself questions about the text that allow you to judge the arguments the authors are making¹. Critical reading takes practice but can help us in both reading and interpreting academic articles. The key to reading critically is not only looking for the information contained in the article, but looking for how the authors think about the subject matter¹.

What is an academic article?

Academic articles are papers written by professionals in a field². These articles follow a common structure and are often written with formal language. Articles often assume that the reader has a certain amount of understanding of the subject already³. Understanding the structure of an article, as well as WHY your professor has chosen to give you a specific article are part of critically reading them.

How are academic articles structured?

Academic articles are not all written in the same way, but they often contain many of the same elements.

Section of Text	Purpose
Article Information	Includes the date of publication, source, author(s) and contributor information. It is important to know whether an article is peer reviewed
Title	Tells you what the article is about
Abstract	An overview of the article. This gives the reader a “snapshot” of the contents
Introduction	This introduces the topic, as well as previous research done on the topic (called a literature review), gaps in the knowledge about it, and what their paper is going to achieve (the argument or thesis)
Design	If research was done or data was compiled to make the article, this is where the author(s) tell you about how they did that. This section can be quite technical and is often called the “methods”
Results	The outcome of the research or data compiling will appear in this section. This does not include how the authors interpret the data that they found. Statistical analysis is often found here
Discussion	This is where the data is interpreted, and conclusions are drawn. The authors should also include the limitations of their study and may also include next steps

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References	The authors list articles, textbooks, and other sources that they have cited or used information from to make their own article
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Approaching academic articles

Critically reading an academic article takes time and practice. Often, they need to be looked at a few times to fully grasp the purpose of the article, methods, and overarching concepts.

Before diving in, it can be useful to skim the article. Look for sections that contain the main point of the article and find any words that you don't understand. This can help prepare you for a more critical look at the contents¹.

Steps for critically reading an academic article

Now that we know what the components of a research article are for, how do we critically read an article?^{1,3}

Find the purpose (thesis) of the article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What questions does the author ask? • What arguments does the author make? • Why are the authors writing this article?
Find the context of the article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a debate happening about the subject? • Why does the paper matter? • Who is this article written for? • Is the article peer reviewed by other experts?
Assess the argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the argument biased? • How strong is the argument?
Assess the evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What evidence does the paper contain (peer reviewed articles, anecdotes, ethics, etc.)? • How does the evidence fit into the context of the article? • Do the results reflect what they are supposed to measure?
Evaluate the components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the evidence adequately address the argument? • Are there flaws in the methodology? • Are there flaws in the evaluation of the data? • What questions are left unanswered?

After reading the article and asking yourself the above questions, you can come to conclusions about the article and the arguments that the author(s) have made. Be sure to make note of questions that you have and ask questions if you are unsure about something! Remember - reading academic articles takes practice, so give yourself time to process the contents and read it multiple times if necessary.

References

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