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Reading Journal Articles

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Most courses come with a reading list that includes journal articles recommended by your lecturer. This article aims to help you understand how to approach journal articles and get the most out of them.

Are all journal articles the same?

No. Journal articles differ in *purpose* and *format*. Knowing which type of journal article you are going to read will enable you to predict its content, and thus facilitate your comprehension. For your university studies, the following types of journal articles are most relevant:

1. Research reports

- Purpose: To give first-hand accounts of original research
- Format: Usually structured in well-defined sections, e.g.:
 - Abstract: A brief summary highlighting rationale, methods and findings
 - Introduction: A brief review covering the theoretical background and earlier research on the topic, and giving reasons for the current research
 - Method: Details on how the research was conducted and what materials were used
 - Results: Details on findings and statistical tests, with summaries of data in the form of charts/graphs/tables
 - Discussion (sometimes embedded in Results section): Analysis, interpretations and implications of results
 - Conclusion (sometimes embedded in Discussion section): Summary of key findings and suggestions of future directions for further research

2. Literature reviews

- Purpose: To analyse and consolidate the findings of other authors so as to give a more critical and cohesive view of a topic
- Format: Focus on analysis of theories through:
 - Overview of information from previous publications
 - Identification of relationships/inconsistencies/contradictions/gaps in current knowledge
 - Recommendations and suggestions for future work

3. Theoretical reviews

- Purpose: To present new theories or challenge existing ones
- Format: Similar to literature reviews whereby authors usually trace a theory's development, and then expand on it, postulating their own refinements

How should I approach a journal article?

1. Get some background knowledge on the topic first. Refer to your textbooks, as journal writers generally assume that you know the basics, and will be liberal in their use of terminology.
2. Read for the author's meaning. At this point, you are not looking for more information on the topic, but are focusing on the way in which it is being thought about. You can do this by:
 - Reading carefully to understand the author's meaning. Ensure that you have understood what the author wants to say, and not what you think the author wants to say. Having defined the purpose of the article, draw up a brief outline of its contents to help you follow the writer's flow of thought without getting sidetracked by too much detail.

- Asking questions, e.g.:
 - What is the author's theoretical basis?
 - What new aspect is being added to what is already known?
 - Especially for research reports: What is/are the author's argument(s) in relation to supporting/rejecting the hypotheses?

Approached in this way, reading journal articles will reinforce your knowledge of, and develop your thinking about, the topic, by finding out what other people have to say and keeping up with latest developments in the research.

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