

Reading A Scholarly Paper– Not As Scary As You Think!

Introduction

At first glance, journal articles seem to be overwhelming to the novice scientist due to their esoteric nature and the sheer amount of information that they contain. But for all intents and purposes, a person does not need to read every word of any given article.

Here are the most common sections of a journal article:

Abstract – Summary of the whole paper

Introduction – Gives general overview of the topic and the purpose of the article

Materials and Methods – Experimental procedures used for the data

Results – The raw data

Discussion – Analysis of the data and what conclusions can be drawn from their experiments

References – Other journal articles where data came from

Some parts of the journal article are more pertinent to what you may need to know.

Sometimes, all you need to get out of a paper comes from the abstract; while other times, you have to do a close reading of the whole paper. As a rule of thumb, when looking through a large amount of articles, the abstract is very useful in determining which papers are relevant to what you want to know. Once you have narrowed down the number of papers, look through the introduction and figure out what the purpose of the paper is.

The introduction is also a good place to find out about past work on the subject. Next, look at the discussion to see what conclusions they have drawn on the topic. If you need to know more specific details about how the authors came to their conclusions, only then look to the graphs/tables and results in the paper. And lastly, if you want to reproduce a certain part of the procedure, you will look to their materials and methods. Also, the reference section is great to gain clarification about certain parts of the paper that cites other journal articles.

Assignment

Your assignment is to pick a topic (the more specific, the better) and find 5 scholarly papers using your preferred database. For instance, PubMed is great for science-oriented articles and EBSCO (Academic Search Premier) and JSTOR are great for liberal arts-oriented articles. Read through the abstracts of each and write a couple of sentences explaining what each paper is about. Then pick the paper you found most interesting and read it.

1. Write a few sentences explaining what previous work has been done on the subject and what the author(s) plan to accomplish. (To gain a better understanding of the background, it may be useful to look up a paper referenced in the introduction. If you do so, be sure to include what you read in this explanation.)

2. Summarize each figure in the results section of the paper as well as you can. (If you are unfamiliar with the methods used, read through the methods section closely and look up more details online).

3. Lastly, give a quick summary of the discussion and write down three questions for further research based upon the conclusions drawn from the paper or aspects of the paper that interested you.

Note: If you are doing a liberal arts scholarly article, part 2 may not apply, so here discuss the methodology the author uses to arrive at his/her conclusions and determine if you think he or she gives enough evidence to support these conclusions.

When turning in this skill module, please include links to all the papers you addressed.