

How to Read a Research Study Article

1. Know the structure of a research study article.

A research study article will consistently contain the following sections:

Abstract
Introduction
Methods
Results
Discussion
References

Some section names may change slightly, e.g. Methods might be Research Methods or Methodology. If you don't find these sections in a journal article, then you don't have a research study article.

2. Know what each section contains.

Abstract

Summary of the key points of the article: the purpose of the study and a hypothesis, the methodology used, who was studied, and the findings. Read this first, but don't rely on it solely to draw conclusions about the study.

Introduction

Contains a survey of the relevant background for a study, a context for the study, and the hypothesis (i.e. the specific predictions to be tested). It will also usually contain a review of prior studies related to the same topic.

Methods

Describes the approach taken in the study. This section provides detailed information about the research instrument used, (e.g. questionnaire), subjects (e.g. females between the ages of 5 and 7), procedures, and the approach to data analysis.

Results

Data is summarized in this section, and relationships among variables and/or differences among groups are reported. These analyses should directly reflect the predictions originally described in the Introduction. Further comparisons may also be included to clarify findings or to explore unanticipated findings.

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Discussion

Results are summarized in narrative form as opposed to statistics or numbers. The ways in which the study's results coincide with the hypothesis and previous studies will also be discussed, as well as suggestions for the need for further studies on the topic.

References

Listing of the sources cited in the article such as books and articles, as well as sources not directly used but are relevant to the topic. NOTE: Use the Reference list to find still other sources on your topic!

3. Now you're ready to read.

Not first to last page, unless you're really familiar with the topic. Instead,

1. Start with the Abstract for an overview.
2. Read the first paragraph or so of the Introduction to get a sense of the issue. Go to the last paragraph to read the hypothesis.
3. Skim the Discussion to see how the study turned out.
4. Now, go back to the middle part for the details. Read the Methods section carefully and plan to reread it, even a couple of times to digest it all.
5. Then, read the Results section. You may want to turn to the Discussion section for clarification of what the reported statistics demonstrate. Don't get bogged down in the details of either the Methods or the Results section, but try to get a good idea of how the hypotheses were tested.
6. Read the Discussion section more closely.
7. Finally, read the whole article, first page to last page. Reread for the greatest comprehension.

Adapted from: Franzoi, S.L. & Ratliff-Crain, J. (2003). Guide to reading research articles. In Instructor's manual to accompany social psychology. 3rd ed. (pp.29-30). Boston: McGraw-Hill.