

Working with Journal Articles

A journal, or periodical, is an academic publication that is a collection of articles written by scholars and reviewed by their peers. The articles are written in a specific way, according to the discipline and the academic style (APA, MLA, CMS, etc). Below are some pointers for working with journal articles when doing background reading or research for papers.

Author

- You will be citing the article in your paper, so pay attention to who wrote it.
- Associate the article with the author, so that you can make connections during class discussions; instructors often refer to articles by the author's last name.
- Is the author well known? What contributions has s/he made to the discipline?
- If you can't determine the theory, then look for some principles or assumptions that the author seems to be working from so that you can put the article into a context – or big picture – of the discipline rather than considering it a random piece of writing.

Title

- Pay particular attention to the title; it contains key words and gives an idea of both the topic and of the direction the discussion will take.

Theoretical Framework

- Many articles are based on recognized theory, with the idea being to build on – or refute – it. Determine what the underlying theory is so that you can make references to it in your paper.

Structural Framework

- Is the structure visible? You should be able to “see” how the argument is put together.
- Is there an introduction at the beginning and a conclusion at the end?
- Is the body organized by headings and subheadings? If so, pay attention to them.
- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence? Highlight (one or two words only) the ideas that define the topic of the paragraph.
- Is there an abstract? If so, read it!
- Is there a summary? If so, read it!

Topic

- What is the intended purpose of the article?
- Notice how the author approaches the topic:
 - Is s/he trying to lend support to an existing theory or to argue against it?
 - Is a new perspective or approach being put forward?

Main Ideas

- The main ideas support the topic and purpose of the article. What are the main ideas discussed in the article? Identify and explain them in terms of the topic and the discipline.
- How are these ideas developed in the article? (Research study, case study, discussion, comparison and contrast...)
- How are they being supported? (Evidence, examples, statistics...)

Method

- In an academic research study, is the methodology sound?
 - Is it well described and complete?
 - Are the measurements valid?
 - Is the data analysis accurate?
 - Are the conclusions sound?
 - Do you agree with the recommendations?
 - What are the strengths and limitations?
- In a non-academic article, is the author presenting an objective argument or an emotional appeal?
 - Rhetoric?
 - One-sided arguments?

Importance

- How does the article “move forward” your understanding of the topic, the subject, and the discipline?
- How is the article useful and practical?

Adapted from *The Literature Review: A Few Tips on Conducting It*
<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html>