

This may be the first time that many of you need to read research reports. Although this may seem surprising, being able to read these reports effectively and efficiently is a learned skill. Research reports are not like a lot of other literature, including “think pieces,” opinion pieces, literature reviews and the like. I hope that this guide will help you learn to use research reports effectively, to read them quickly and to be able to extract the key points from them effectively. This will, I believe, reduce considerably the amount of time that you spend simply reading the research literature for this course. Assignments 1 & 2 deal specifically with identifying high caliber research journals, identifying research reports, and reading and understanding research reports. This overview that may be of help in completing assignments.

Finding High Caliber Articles to Read

I use a three-step procedure to decide whether to put the article in (1) the “must read” category, (2) the “may be interesting” category, or (3) the “not what I need” category.

Step 1: The Abstract

Read the abstract first. A good abstract is a comprehensive summary of the major components of the report. This course requires that you rely primarily on articles that report **original research**. This means that they author(s) him/herself conducted the research. This usually means that the authors collected the data themselves, but some authors use existing databases to conduct original research, in which case their contribution consists of analyzing new or different relationships between variables. There are several longitudinal national databases, for example, that social scientists frequently use as the data source for their research. You can usually tell if the research reported is original or not from the abstract. Opinion pieces, research reviews, literature reviews and such are useful in this course and more generally in your professional work – but they are not a substitute for research reports. Keep the good ones and use them, but do not rely exclusively on them. Reading what someone says a researcher found is not the same as reading the researcher’s original research report. Be wary of articles when the abstract seems to focus largely on “recommendations.” This is a sign that the article is for a general practitioner or general audience rather than advanced professionals. I immediately assign articles to one of my three categories based on the abstract.

Step 2: A Quick Perusal

Once you have decided to examine an article in more detail, based on the information in the abstract, a quick perusal will help you decide if you want to read it in detail or not. Here are some things to examine.

Check the length. Simply put, short (3-4 page articles) are unlikely to contain the detailed information you need.

Look at the introduction to the article (usually labeled such, but sometimes not). This is where the author will usually describe the theoretical framework for the research, if there is one. The introduction is usually substantive in research reports that discuss theory-based research. The author needs to explain the theoretical framework for the work and the specific constructs

under study. The introduction usually constitutes a literature review as well. You will see several references to previous research, often including references to key conceptual or theoretical pieces produced in the past by the same or other authors. If the article has few references in the introduction, the introduction is very short, or the introduction focuses almost exclusively on application, the article probably is not what you want.

Look at the procedures or methodology section. Reports of original research almost always have a detailed methodological section. It may be called “methods,” “methodology,” “procedures,” “methodological approach,” or by other similar phrases. You want an article where this section is well developed.

Look at the “results” section. You are looking for detail and sophistication. Many of the most valuable reports of original research use sophisticated analytic procedures. However, do not let the absence of statistical procedures fool you. Much original research does not rely on statistical analysis. This section can be titled “analysis,” “findings,” “results” or something similar. You are looking for articles where the authors explain in detail (1) how they analyzed the data and (2) what their findings were. If you start to see simple graphs of percentages and such, or highly summarized findings, you probably do not have the kind of article you want.

Look at the references. Even if an article turns out not to be exactly what you wanted, it may still be very useful. Use the references to find additional relevant articles. This will usually be much more time efficient than conducting many searches of the library databases. For example, if you are trying to find an article with a good discussion of the theoretical framework for research, do **NOT** reject an article just because the article itself does not contain an extensive theoretical discussion. Look at the references. You may need to consult one or more of the articles in the references to learn about the theoretical framework for the research reported in the article. Many, if not most, authors assume that the reader of a research journal is familiar with the theoretical frameworks used in a field of study and many simply site ground-breaking research reports or research reviews rather than consume valuable space in the research report. Similarly, some author report various aspects of a large research project in several articles. One article may not contain the detailed discussion of the methodology that you want because the authors may have published this in another article about the research. They will refer to that article in the references and tell you where to find the detailed methodological discussion. Start with the most recent publications and follow the trail back through time with the references.

Completing Mickie’s Wonderful (oh yeah) Assignments

The following section provides some guidance about how to complete the assignments for this course. I think you will be able to complete the assignments more quickly and perform better if you use this approach

Step 1: Think about the Questions

Each of your assignments has a detailed list of questions that you must answer. Read them and think about them **before** you read articles in detail. My motto is “Know what you need before you read.”

Step 2: Read for Overall Content

Read the first time for overall comprehension, not details. Do not try to answer the questions in the assignment the first time you read the article. Do not spend time marking up the article and looking for details. Simply read it through to get the content of the article fixed in your mind.

Step 3: Use the “Cheat Sheets”

Read for detail the second time. I developed “cheat sheets” for reading and understanding research reports based very closely on those of Locke et al. They help you get at the key information in a logical order and quickly. I encourage you to use them. They are linked to the course home page. There is one for reading and understanding research reviews, too.

Step 4: Develop Answers for Factual Questions

Your assignments include two kinds of questions. The first are simple factual questions. For example, I will ask you how the study participants were selected? How many subjects were included in the study? Answer these questions first. You should be able to find the information you need to answer them quickly once you have read the article and especially if you used one of the cheat sheets as you read the article.

Step 5: Develop Answers for Analytic Questions

Other questions ask you to **apply** the concepts that we learn about in class. Answer these questions last. For example, I will ask you to explain the implications of sample selection approach for internal and external validity. Explain your conclusions thoroughly. I want to understand your logic and see that you can apply concepts. Questions of this type require that you integrate what you have learned in class. While you may need to re-read certain portions of an article to answer these questions, the answers are not in the article. They are in your head. You will usually be better off spending your time consulting your text, other readings, and class notes than searching for details or explanations in the article itself. Remember that part of your grade for each assignment includes using additional published literature about research design to answer these questions. If, for example, the article used a purposive sampling technique, you may have questions about the statistical generalization of the results, one aspect of external validity. You will need to think about the pros and cons of purposive samples in general, how the specific sample for this study was taken, and whether the sampling technique used does raise questions in your mind about the statistical generalization of the results. You will probably want to consult literature about purposive sampling before you answer this question.