
Guidelines and Steps for Analyzing Journal Articles¹

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These guidelines/steps are provided to help students analyze and critique journal articles in order to produce quality literature reviews and complete course learning objectives. The criteria and questions are listed in section one. Strategies for putting the criteria together are discussed in section two. An outline for writing an analysis can be found in section three.

Section One. Criteria and Questions for Analyzing Journal Articles

1. Research Question-(i) What question/s is the article trying to answer? (ii) To what extent is it stated clearly and explicitly? (iii) If it is not stated explicitly, are you able to draw inferences from the article to identify the research question/s?
2. Contributions to the Literature-(i) How does the article contribute to the scientific literature? To identify the contributions you might ask: Have the authors identified a gap in the literature that needs to be filled, or a need to test competing theories/hypotheses, or explore a theory in a new context? (ii) To what extent is the contribution stated clearly and explicitly?
3. Main Argument(s) or Findings-(i) What basic arguments are the author(s) trying to make or what are their key findings/conclusions? (ii) To what extent are the arguments or findings stated clearly and explicitly?
4. Operationalization - (i) To what extent are variables operationalized (measured) in a valid manner? (ii) To what extent does variable operationalization adequately represent the variable concept (construct validity)? (iii) Are important variables not operationalized? Which ones?
5. Research Design/Data Sources - (i) What is the research design/data sources (e.g. documents, surveys, interviews)? (ii) To what extent is the information gathered and analyzed in a manner that is intersubjectively reliable (replicable)? (iii) How are data limitations addressed and threats to validity controlled for (e.g., control groups)?
6. Purpose and Causality-(i) Is the basic argument exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory? (ii) What variables are critical for making the basic argument? (iii) If applicable, what are the independent and dependent variables? (iii) What causal process does the article make with the variables? (i.e., how are the variables related?) (iv) What is the theory and hypotheses for the causal process? Are the hypotheses supported or refuted? (v) Is there internal validity?
7. Statistical Techniques (not a focus for CJ 6320)-(i) How appropriate are the statistical techniques in the paper? (ii) Does the author test for assumptions/limitations? (iii) Do the data show what the author says they show? Does the author discuss dissonant findings?
8. Generalizability - (i) To what extent does the author seek to generalize their basic argument? (ii) How valid are the generalizations?
9. Implications-(i) What are the policy implications from the article? (ii) In what ways are the implications drawn from the arguments/data in the article?
10. Clarity of Writing-(i) Is the article well-written? (ii) Is the writing clear? (iii) Could the article be written more succinctly?

¹ These 2010 guidelines were written and updated by Chris Weible based in part from similar guidelines designed by Paul Sabatier and Jim Wilen (circa 2003-2005). Substantial modifications were made by Tanya Heikkila in 2010. The entire document was revised and amended for use in CJ 6320 by Jace Valcore in 2020.

Section Two. Reading a social science journal article.

Sometimes it is useful to have a strategy for applying the criteria above. The steps below provide tips for reading/critiquing a journal article.

Step 1. Read the title and abstract. Then skim through the whole paper taking about 10 seconds to get a feel for the methods of argument. Is the paper theoretical? Empirical? Decide whether this article contributes to your current research objectives before investing any more time and effort.

Step 2. Read/skim the introductory section. The introductory section usually starts with a broad introductory sentence/paragraph before narrowing down to the particular focus/topic of the paper. Look for the contribution to the literature, basic arguments, and research question. Sometimes the basic argument is not mentioned in the introduction or only foreshadowed.

Step 3. Read/skim the conclusions and scan the table/figures. Look for the main arguments and the explanatory/descriptive approach? The main arguments are often in the first paragraph in the conclusion, the last paragraph of the introduction, or in the abstract. Sometimes the main arguments are not clear at all. You'll usually find a statement about the generalizability and the policy implications near the end of the conclusion.

Steps 1 through 3 should take about 10 minutes. At this point, you should have a good sense of the article and be able to answer some of the questions related to the research question, the contribution to science, the policy implications, generalizability, and the basic arguments.

Step 4. Read the article through. The last sentence of the introduction usually describes the general layout of the paper. As you read the paper you will come across the theory and methods sections. Identify the explanatory/descriptive approach and the research design/data sources. Look for the expectations, propositions, or hypotheses. Usually there is a section on the case study or topic. Check to make sure that the author justified the importance of the case or topic of study. Why is it interesting?

As you move onto the results section, check out the tables/figures. Identify, if any, the independent and dependent variables. What statistical methods are used? Are the variables in the tables/figures clearly and consistently labeled? Is it easy to connect the variable label with the hypotheses, operationalization, and concept? Does the author adequately describe the methods used, explain why a particular method is used, and provide a clear and thoughtful interpretation of the results? How robust are the results?

At the end of the article is a section for discussions and conclusions. Does the author discuss the limitations of the article and generalizability (usually found near the end of the conclusion)? Check again for the main arguments, research questions, policy implications, and the contribution to science. You'll want to go back and reread sections of the paper to check for the consistency of the parts. Do the descriptive/empirical approach, data sources, and research design support the main arguments, answer the research question, and back up the contribution to the literature? What have you learned from this result? What is the important insight? Is the paper important? What new research questions arise as a result of this paper, or are new directions for future research identified?

Completing steps 1 through 4 can take more than an hour. You will probably want to reread the article and skip back and forth to critique it.

Section 3. Writing up your Analysis. For the journal article critique assignment, you will need to complete all 5 steps in depth. For your literature review, you will want to determine/take notes on Steps 1-4 for each article, then use that analysis to organize a thematic literature review and to identify gaps for future research.

Step 1. Write up a very brief summary of the main arguments and research questions that the paper addresses. Discuss whether you find it to be an important topic.

Step 2. Discuss the **main** strengths of the article. Use the criteria in Section 1 to categorize the main strengths. Discuss them in a logical order. Provide a justification for why you have assessed each of these points to be strengths.

Step 3. Discuss the weaknesses of the article. Use the criteria in Section 1 to categorize the weaknesses. Discuss them in a logical order. Provide a justification for why you have assessed each of these points to be weaknesses. Use examples from the paper to back up your claims. Draw upon research design and methodological literature, if necessary, to provide additional support for your critique.

Step 4. Summarize your main impressions of the article and provide a balanced perspective of its overall strengths and weaknesses. Offer some concrete recommendations for how the article could be improved.

Step 5. Edit your paper. Check for typos and awkward sentences. Don't blather on. Keep it succinct and clear. Journal critique assignment must include a complete APA citation for the article with doi

