STUDENT NOTES FOR SUCCESS

No 21
Reading Journal Articles

Academic or scholarly texts have their own particular requirements, style and structure. The following notes will be useful to you as you can use the structure to help you read.

When do you use research papers?

You will often be required to cite journal articles for your assignments. Your lecturers and tutors may refer to journal articles as journal papers, research papers, scholarly literature, academic papers or other synonyms. What they are looking for is original research that has been published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Structure

The structure of a journal article is very different to reports, essays, books and other types of writing. It normally follows a logical and sequential presentation of the research process, which helps to guide your reading in a focussed way. Most articles start with a title, key words and abstract then follow the IMRD structure (Introduction, Methods, Results, Conclusion).

Title

When broken down, an article title will provide key words about the topic and context of the paper. A title will often contain words that link the paper to a particular conference, area of research or theme running through contemporary academic literature.

Authors

The article should list the author/s and their affiliations. This is helpful to check the credibility of the author/s (are they from a well-known institution?) and, since researchers often complete several research projects on the same topic, may help you to find related papers for your assignment.

Key words

These are usually descriptors that the author has used to get the paper published in a particular journal. They are used by search engines to highlight an article's content, focus, context or relationship with other materials/situations.

Abstract

The aim of an article abstract is to summarise overall themes, ideas, facts, research approach, context, findings and recommendations and conclusions. It is intended to capture the attention of readers, to hold their interest and encourage them to read the entire publication. An abstract is also used by search engines to identify elements or descriptors to help researchers narrow their literature search.

Introduction or Background

The introduction to a journal article is of key importance. Its purpose is to set up the research background, reviewing the existing literature and establishing the context of the research. A successful introduction should lead the reader to the research question and entice them to read on.

Methods

Here writers set out their detailed research methodology, data gathering and analysis methods and include ways used to ensure the soundness of their research. In short, in a discussion section the writer tells the reader 'this is what I did' and 'this is how I did it' in enough detail that their study can be replicated.

The methods can be qualitative (descriptive) including interviews, focus groups and case

studies. Or they can be quantitative (numerical) including surveys, mathematical models, forecasting and hypothesis testing.

Results or Findings

This section describes the 'findings' or 'results' or 'outcomes' of the research. The various findings may be statistically based, graphically represented, or described in rich detail.

Discussion

In the section, the author/s present their findings in the context of other research findings and describe why their findings are of interest to the reader or the discipline. Normally the discussion is ordered from the most important or relevant findings, followed by other findings, then limitations and recommendations.

It is important that limitations are stated because such limitations may change how the reader interprets or values the material. However, the limitations should never be stated in a way that seems to portray a weakness or some sort of shortcoming in your own study. Instead they should be stated as indicating 'the limits' of what you did so that others can build on your findings or research.

Recommendations allow writers to suggest applications of their findings to new situations or to address particular needs or problems that led to their research. It is not unusual to see suggestions provided for further study or research in the area or in an associated area based on results of the documented research.

Conclusion

The concluding section of a journal article usually includes a summing up of the topic, emergent findings and recommended action. Many writers also use the conclusion to reiterate key aspects of their findings or recommendations, to leave the reader with their most valued points fresh in memory. This is a useful way of encouraging readers who skim only the introduction and conclusion to read the entire article.

Variations

Some journals may present these sections in a different order (e.g. the methods might be moved to the end) or combine sections together (e.g. the results and the discussion are often combined) or skip sections entirely (e.g. not all papers have a separate conclusion section). Some journals will also include supplementary files or appendices, especially for detailed methods or survey tools that were too large to include in the body of the paper. You should become familiar with the conventions in the journals of your discipline.

Finding Journals

Journals can be found be going directly to a journal homepage, the publisher website, or a database.

Example

The journal Econometrica can be accessed through their home page at www.econometricsociety.org/publications/econometrica/ or the publisher homepage at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14680262 and it is included in databases such as Proquest.

You can find databases relevant to your discipline on the Curtin Library website. http://libguides.library.curtin.edu.au/research-study/curtin-business-school