

Reading Journal Articles

Reading any college-level text can be challenging and time-consuming. The amount of reading assigned and the level of difficulty significantly increase from high school to college. Many students find that the skills they needed and used in high school are not as effective in college. Understanding and using effective active reading strategies can transform reading and study time from frustrating and confusing to meaningful, purposeful, and successful. Using active reading strategies can improve comprehension and ensure that you actually retain the information you read.

Journal articles bring their own set of challenges. Since journal articles are usually significantly different from other texts, it's even more important to have a good understanding of active and effective reading strategies, especially ones that are specific to journal articles. This handout provides several strategies for reading journal articles effectively and connects you with resources for reading texts in general.

How are journal articles uniquely challenging?

Journal articles differ from other texts in many significant ways. It is important to understand the unique features of journal articles before starting to read one so that you can better understand it while and after you read.

Background Knowledge: Both the author and the intended audience are likely to be experts on the subject. The author assumes readers are already familiar with basic ideas, terms, and background knowledge.

Vocabulary: The vocabulary is subject-specific and appropriate for advanced readers. Key terms are woven into the text, not highlighted with special formatting or referenced in a glossary. In some cases you can figure out the important information from context; in others, you may need to look up a word or two to understand the article.

Purpose: The author may make a claim, develop an argument, or share an opinion. Look for this in the article's title and abstract (the introductory summary paragraph).

Research: The focus is usually research—either the author’s own or the work of other scholars on the subject. The text is likely to include many references to other researchers.

Specificity: The author may explore a narrow, highly specific topic or perspective within a larger subject.

Formatting: Content may be presented in standardized sections. These include Abstract, Background or Literature Review, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, and Reference sections.

Lack of Visuals: The text may include few or no visual aids (graphs, illustrations, charts)—only text. There may be few or no subheadings or other content delineations.

How to read journal articles effectively

Before reading

Ask your professor for guiding questions or key topics to keep in mind while reading. These suggestions and insights can guide your reading and note taking.

Begin with the abstract (or first page) and the conclusion (or final page) for an overview of topics. These help provide a framework for comprehension.

Think about why your professor might have assigned the article. Brainstorm how the content might relate to what you’ve learned in class so far. The article will make more sense if you have some context and purpose before you read.

Convert headings and topics into simple questions. Jot these down and read for answers. Use these to guide your note taking.

If needed, build a foundation with simpler, shorter sources of information, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reputable websites. Gathering background information will help you process details and identify main ideas more efficiently. Try looking up a different article on the same topic or an article that was referenced multiple times by the article you are reading.

Create a supportive learning environment. Think about what type of setting enables you to concentrate best and avoid distractions. Clear your study area of distracting noises and tempting technologies, and choose a location that is comfortable.

During reading

Feel free to read sections out of order or to focus only on a few sections. In some classes, your professor may be more interested that you understand the context (Background/Lit Review) and the outcomes (Results and Discussion), whereas in others they may want you to think critically about the methods used in the study.

Make a habit of condensing and paraphrasing what you read. As you finish each section or page, how well can you explain key terms and ideas without reproducing the author's words? Use the note-taking template to reduce an article to a single page of summaries.

Finish an entire page or section before taking notes. If there are no breaks, create your own stopping points.

Take note of your thoughts and questions as you read. Don't let them slip away! Incorporate them into class discussions and assignments.

Limit your highlighting and underlining. Many students use this strategy, but it does not require much thinking or help you remember what you read. Instead of over-highlighting as you read, wait until you finish a paragraph or section. Then, determine the main ideas and supporting details in that section and highlight only those.

Try annotating while you read as an alternative to heavy highlighting and underlining. Make symbols to mark questions, main ideas, unknown words, and definitions that you encounter while reading.

After reading

Revisit the article at a later date. You are likely to make connections that weren't obvious during your first read.

Try some active study strategies such as paraphrasing the article or writing a short summary from memory to engage in deeper learning and to better understand the information.

Explain and share what you read with a friend—or at least out loud to yourself—in your own words. Answer any questions provided in the text, by your professor, or on the syllabus.

Create flash cards, concept maps, or an outline to critically think through the material and test yourself.

Use your resources

Make an appointment with an academic coach to discuss journal-reading strategies one-on-one, as well as any other academic issue.

Attend office hours to talk with your professor about strategies specific to your class and text.

The Learning Center has many online resources related to journal reading and note-taking. Find all of them here, and check out some of these specific ones for additional ideas:

- Reading Comprehension Tips
- Reading Textbooks
- Taking Notes While Reading

Works consulted

Dembo, M. H. and Seli, H. (2013). *Motivation and learning strategies for college students: A focus on self-regulated learning* (4th ed.) New York: Taylor & Francis.

Holschuh, J. and Nist, S. L. (2000). *Active learning: Strategies for college success*. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon.



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