How to Read (and Understand) a Journal Article

1. UNDERSTAND HOW A JOURNAL ARTICLE IS STRUCTURED
By understanding the structure, you will feel more comfortable working your way through each section. Here is a visual explanation of the parts of a scholarly article <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/tutorials/scholarly-articles/>

- **Abstract**: This short, paragraph-long section provides a brief overview of the article. Reading the abstract is a great way to get an idea for what information the article will cover. Reading this section first can help you decide if the article is relevant to your topic or interests.

- **Introduction (not always labeled)**: The second section of the article introduces the problem and reviews previous research and literature on the topic. This part of the article will help you better understand the background of the research and the current question that is under investigation.

- **Method Section**: This part of the article details how the research was conducted. Information about the participants, the procedures, the instruments and the variables that were measured are all described in this section.

- **Results Section**: So what were the actual results of the study? This important section details what the researchers found, so pay careful attention to this part of the article. Tables and figures are frequently included in addition to the text.

- **Discussion/Conclusion Section**: What do the results of the study really mean? In this section, the author(s) interpret the results, outline the implications of the study and provide possible descriptions of future research that should be conducted.

- **References Sections**: This section lists all of the articles and other sources cited within the article.

2. PREVIEW THE ARTICLE
Your first step should be to briefly preview the article. Never start by doing an in-depth reading of an article before you have skimmed over each section. Attempting a thorough read-through before you've skimmed the contents is not only difficult; it may be a waste of valuable time. Previewing is a great way to become familiar with the topic and the information included in the paper. In some cases, you may find that the paper is not well-suited to your needs, which can save time and allow you to move on to a research article that is more appropriate.

During the preview don't worry if you don't fully understand the material - this is simply a goal-directed survey of the article. However, you will want to recognize and make mental note of concepts or vocabulary you don't understand but that appear to be important.

**By the end of the preview, you should be able to condense the article into one or two sentences that summarize its main message.**

**Steps of the preview:**
1. Locate and read any information about the author(s): Who are they? What do they do? Where do they work? What is their position? The answers to these questions can give you keys to their purposes and backgrounds and to possible motivations, intentions and bias.

2. Read the abstract to glean the overall purpose, results and conclusions of the paper. A good abstract will provide a succinct summary of the most important information.

3. Examine the tables and figures to understand their main points. Graphs in particular, often summarize a great deal of written material. ("A single picture is worth a thousand words").

4. Read the introduction in full. Then read the first line of each paragraph of the article, until you reach the conclusion, which you should also read in full. In a well-written paper, you will find that the first lines actually read fairly coherently to give a broad overview of the paper's content and flow.
3. **READING FURTHER**
Now comes the time for some important decisions – what you do next with the article depends on the purpose of your reading.
* Do you read further?
* If so, do you want to read the entire article, or just certain sections?
* Of the parts you are going to read, which will you prioritize for high comprehension and which ones do you just need the gist of?
* Below are some ways to go deeper into the article:

**Take Notes on Each Section and Ask Questions:** Carefully read through each section, taking notes as you go. Write down important points, but also make note of any terminology or concepts that you do not understand. Once you've read the entire article, go back and start looking up the information that you didn't understand using another source. This might involve using a dictionary, textbook, online resource or even asking a classmate or your professor.

**Identify Key Information:** Whether you are looking for information that supports the hypothesis in your own paper or carefully analyzing the article and critiquing the research methods or findings, there are important questions that you should answer as you read the article.
1. What is the main hypothesis?
2. Why is this research important?
3. Did the researchers use appropriate measurements and procedures?
4. What were the variables in the study?
5. What was the key finding of the research?
6. Do the findings justify the author’s conclusions?

**Note the Sources Cited:** When reading a research article, it's all too easy to focus on the main sections and overlook the references. However, the reference section can actually be one of the most important parts of the paper, especially if you are looking for further sources for your own paper. Spending some time reviewing this section can indicate important research articles on the topic area in which you are interested.