



When doing research in psychology, although many blogs and articles in magazines like “Scientific American Mind” are helpful in getting a general idea about your topic, it is important to read journal articles that outline actual research.

You have to read the journal article, not just the abstract. When you only read the abstract, you don’t really get the full picture of the study.

When reading a journal article, most people start at the beginning and read word for word, until they eventually arrive at the end. This is not a terrible strategy, but you may get bogged down in all of the psychology language and lose interest – or HOPE! So, here are a few tips for how to read a piece of original research.

I. Start with the title

You can learn a lot about a piece of research just from the title. The title should present a concise statement of the issue being investigated and the variables that were studied - for example, *Ethnic and Mainstream Social Connectedness, Perceived Racial Discrimination, and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms* (Wei et al, 2012)

Just by reading the title we know that the study is about a connection between racial discrimination and PTSD. If you are doing a paper on the role of sociocultural factors in PTSD, this paper could be for you.

II. Read the abstract

The abstract is a brief summary of the study. It is usually a maximum of 200 words. The abstract contains information about how the problem was investigated, the major findings of the study, and hints at implications.

The following abstract is for the study by Wei et al (2012).

It has been argued that race-based traumatic stress can be viewed as a type of trauma. In a sample of 383 Chinese international students at 2 predominantly White mid-western universities, the present results supported this notion and found that perceived racial discrimination predicted posttraumatic stress symptoms over and above perceived general stress. This study found that those who were integrated with their ethnic community experienced lower levels of PTSD related symptoms than those who were integrated into the mainstream culture.

If you were looking to write a paper on PTSD in war veterans, this paper may not be very helpful, as the abstract tells us that the sample was made up of Chinese international students at US universities. It also simply describes “PTSD related symptoms” and not an actual diagnosis of PTSD. If this is not what you are looking for in your research, then you can stop reading here!

The title and abstract of a research report are like a movie preview. A movie preview highlights the important aspects of a movie’s plot, and provides just enough information for us to decide whether to watch the whole film. Titles and abstracts highlight the key features of a research report and let you decide if you want to read the whole paper. But just as with movie previews, they do not give the whole story. It is never enough to just read the abstract.

III. Read the introduction

The introduction explains why the reader should care about the problem being studied. More importantly, the introduction clearly identifies the research question and the researcher’s hypothesis. Although a lot of the background information may be interesting, it may not be so relevant to understanding the study. It may, however, *give you ideas of studies for further research*. You can use the references to help find more studies relevant to the topic.

While reading the introduction, ask yourself these three questions:

- *What questions does the researcher hope to answer with this study?*
- *Why does the researcher consider this question to be worth investigating?*
- *What is the hypothesis of this study?*

IV. Skim the Method section

The method section includes the design of the study (independent samples, repeated measures, or a qualitative approach). It will also describe the sample and procedure. When reading through this section, make note of the following:

- What research method was used? (Interviews, experiment, observation)
- What was the independent variable? How was it defined and manipulated?
- What was the dependent variable? How was it defined and measured?
- Is there anything important to note about the nature of the sample?
- Was the study done under highly controlled conditions or in a natural environment?

Finally, you should be able to summarize the procedure. This does not mean that you need to know every detail – this can be found in the study itself. Could you write a two to three-sentence summary of what the researchers actually did?

V. Skim the results section

This section is often considered the most daunting. At this stage in your study of psychology, you do not understand statistics, so the temptation is to skip this section. Here are some tips to make it easier:

- Look at the data tables. What do they appear to say about the study?
- Look at the graphs. What do they tell you about the findings with regard to the hypothesis?
- Find the statement of significance. Did the results support the research hypothesis?

VI. Read the discussion

The discussion section often opens with a summary of what the study found and evaluation of whether the findings supported the original hypothesis. If the research hypothesis was not supported *consider the researchers' explanation as to why it was not supported. Does this seem reasonable to you?*

More modern research often includes **reflexivity** – that is, the researcher reflects on how their own biases may have affected the research – or how their choice of methodology may have led to the results that they obtained.

The discussion section is usually the most readable section of any report. Some students find it useful to read the first few paragraphs of the discussion section before reading any other part of the research report.

VII. Finalizing your note-taking

After you have finished reading a report, if you think that it is useful for your research, remember to do the following:

1. Write down full bibliographic reference.
2. Decide whether this study is in support of the position of your research, or whether it is a counter-argument. When organizing your research, it is a good idea to create a chart in which you keep a list of studies that can be used for both sides of your argument.
3. For each study make note of evaluation points that are specific to that study.
4. In addition, as you carry out your research, develop a list of general trends in the research.

Sample note-taking

The following is a sample of a chart that shows how you might write a paper on the role of socio-cultural factors on PTSD. The citations are included at the bottom of the chart.

Evidence for	Evaluation	Discussion points (general)
Weine et al (1998)	Difficult to separate out the effects of war and the effects of immigration. Limited to Bosnian refugees.	1. Difficult to isolate the variable of acculturation - that is, moving to a new country.
Henley & Robison	A meta-analysis; may have selection bias; researchers look at a range of variables	2. The samples often do not speak the language of the researcher.

(2011)

Carlson &
Rosser-
Hogan
(1991)

Used older DSM diagnosis criteria. All had suffered from genocide.

3. Many samples are made up of refugees who have fled war; this biases the sample.

Wei et al
(2012)

Not actually diagnosed with PTSD.

Counter-evidence**Evaluation****Discussion points (general)**Costandi
(2011)

Argues that genes may play a role in PTSD, but is not clear which genes and how they may interact. Inherited disposition to the disorder is difficult to isolate from environmental or family factors.

1. There does appear to be some support for genetic arguments, but they cannot be separated from environmental factors. More prospective research needs to be carried out.

Fields
(2005)

Looks at the role of genes and how it may be possible in the future to do gene therapy. The argument is speculative.

2. Animal research is difficult to generalize to human behaviour.

Kaouane
(2012)

Animal research; difficult to generalize to humans.

3. High levels of stress in animal research may not be equivalent to trauma in human beings. Human trauma is connected to meaning.

Citations

Carlson, E., & Rosser-Hogan, R. (1991). Trauma experiences, Posttraumatic stress, dissociation and depression in Cambodian refugees. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 148: 1548 - 1551.

Costandi, M. (2011). Pregnant 9/11 survivors transmitted trauma to their children. Retrieved November 04, 2016, from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/neurophilosophy/2011/sep/09/pregnant-911-survivors-transmitted-trauma>

Fields, R. D. (2005). Erasing Memories. Retrieved November 04, 2016, from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/erasing-memories/>

Henley, J., & Robinson, J. (2011). Mental health issues among refugee children and adolescents. *Clinical Psychologist*, 15(2), 51-62.

Kaouane, N. (2012). Glucocorticoids can induce PTSD-like memory impairments in mice. Retrieved November 04, 2016, from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22362879>

Wei, M., Wang, K. T., Heppner, P. P., & Du, Y. (2012). Ethnic and mainstream social connectedness, perceived racial discrimination, and posttraumatic stress symptoms. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 59(3), 486-493.

Weine, S. M., Vojvoda, D., Becker, D. F., McGlashan, T. H., Hodzic, E., Laub, D., . . . Lazrove, S. (1998). PTSD Symptoms in Bosnian Refugees 1 Year After Resettlement in the United States. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 155(4), 562-564.