# Reading journal articles

Journal articles, or peer-reviewed scholarly papers, are a major source of information for students. Unlike books, journal articles are produced regularly and are therefore more up-to-date. The word "journal" comes from the French *jour* meaning "day or daily". Most journals are published much less frequently that this (usually monthly, quarterly or twice a year) but they are certainly more likely to contain recent information than books.

In a *good* journal, articles undergo a lengthy process of peer review by experts in the field, so one can be sure the information is based on evidence and uses sufficient scholarly rigor. That said, there are tiers of journals: A* (the best), A and B (very good/good), C (OK) and lower tier publications. There are increasingly a large number of bogus publications that have little scholarly merit and produced for profit from paying authors desperate to see their articles published.

How can you establish whether a journal is good, and extract information quickly from a journal article?

1. *Use Ulrich's:* To establish whether you have a good source, type the name of the journal into **Ulrich's** a global periodicals listing: http://ulrichsweb.serialssolutions.com/
2. *Check the inside (or rear) cover:* This inside cover of a journal will usually list the Chief Editor or Executive Editor, Editor, Associate Editors and other people involved in the journal. They should be from well-known institutions. This is a good—but not guaranteed—indication the journal is reputable. If you don't have a hard copy, look at the journal's website. Check for Editors and Associate Editors.
3. *Check the spine and front cover:* a journal will usually have a **volume number** and **issue** number. This is another possible indicator of a reliably good journal (the longer the history, generally speaking, the better). These are identified as follows: *[name of journal] 23*(4), i.e., *volume*(issue).
4. *Check the front page of an article:* It should list the title, the DOI (digital object identifier—a direct way of accessing the paper) and the authors, all of whom should be academics from good universities. An example is given below. Obviously, the title of paper should be relevant to you.
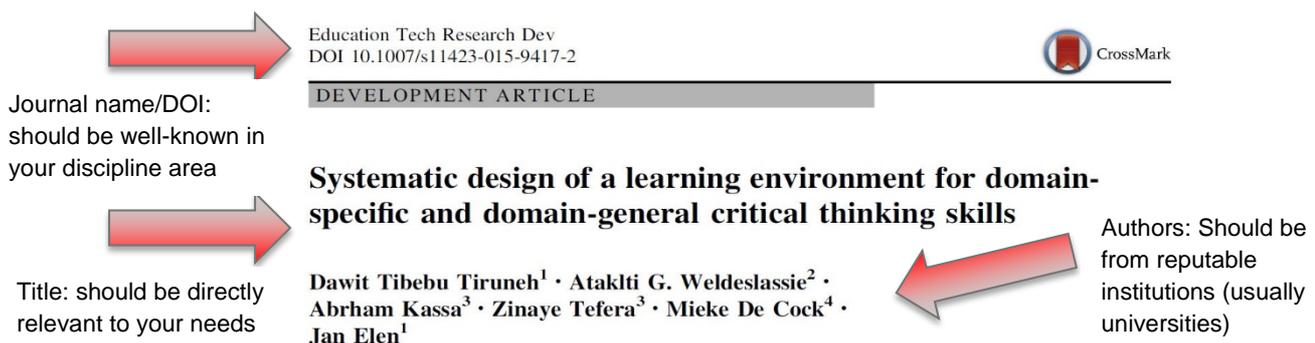
Journal name/DOI: should be well-known in your discipline area

Education Tech Research Dev
DOI 10.1007/s11423-015-9417-2

CrossMark

DEVELOPMENT ARTICLE

Systematic design of a learning environment for domain-specific and domain-general critical thinking skills

Title: should be directly relevant to your needs

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Authors: Should be from reputable institutions (usually universities)

5. *Look at the **Abstract**:* Once you have established that you have a reputable journal, look at the Abstract. The aim of an abstract is to summarise the key points from each part of the article: the introduction (aim/purpose), method, results, and discussion (sometimes a **Structured Abstract** lists these as sub-headings in the abstract itself). In qualitative or theoretical papers the Abstract serves as a summary of the argument in the paper. If the Abstract is not directly relevant to you, discard the paper; if it seems useful to you, go further.
6. *Read the conclusion:* The conclusion of a paper might be clearly marked as such or it might be unmarked. Either way, there will be one. If it is not marked with a sub-heading: "Conclusion", look for indicator works

like: "In sum…", "In conclusion…", "In the final analysis.." and so on. The last paragraph or two usually comprises concluding comments. A conclusion, unlike an introduction, will summarise not only the main claim of the paper (the "thesis statement") but also summarise the evidence or arguments given in the paper itself. Again, if this looks relevant, go further. An example is provided below:

Conclusion

What it did

Implications

This study explored the effectiveness of systematically designed subject matter instruction on the development of domain-specific and domain-general CT skills. It demonstrated that a typical freshman course systematically designed based on the First Principles of Instruction model—with an implicit focus on the desired CT outcomes as an integral part of the domain-specific classroom activities—can stimulate the development of domain-specific CT skills. This finding suggests that systematic design of subject matter instruction needs to be made an important component of teaching and learning in undergraduate

What it showed (contribution)

7. *Read the Introduction:* The introduction has a number of jobs: 1) to situate the topic of the article in a wider scholarly context; 2) to narrow down from this general topic to a specific focus; 3) identify why this specific sub-topic should be addressed (the research "gap"); 4) to state the hypothesis or research question; and 5) to provide an outline of the paper. Often this is stated explicitly: "Firstly, the paper… secondly, the .. is investigated.... A well-written introduction will help the reader navigate through the paper and anticipate the conclusions made by the author.

Introduction

Context

"Gap"

There has been a growing recognition in literature, that the key critical thinking skill for students to be successful in English language university study, is the ability to understand and use evidence-based logical reasoning. In virtually all disciplines, students are expected to be able to present both orally and in writing a well-argued logical academic case supporting conclusions based on research (Davies, 2001, 2003, 2006). Despite the importance of logical reasoning to academic success many students find it difficult either to present a well-reasoned academic case or to follow the flow of logical reasoning in their readings of academic texts let alone to engage in any kind of critical analysis of this reasoning. This is particularly the case in the TEFL context. We argue that the problem is that students usually do not receive any training in how to use evidence-based logical reasoning and that this problem can be overcome through training them in the use of Computer Supported Argument Mapping (CSAM).

Narrow focus

Outline of paper

In the following paper we present a case in support of the following claims:

1. EFL Students' problems with applying critical reasoning in their reading and writing of academic texts are not primarily language-based but result from a lack of explicit instruction in the mechanics and principles of evidence-based logical reasoning.
2. Computer Supported Argument Mapping (CSAM) offers a useful way to help EFL students build critical reasoning skills in their reading and writing of academic texts.

Thesis/contribution

The contribution that this paper makes is that while there has been a considerable amount of research into the usefulness of CSMA for improving the critical thinking and reading/writing

Thesis/contribution again (relevance)

8. *Skim read the paper:* Once the Abstract, Conclusion and Introduction clearly establish the usefulness of the paper, the student should then: 1) use the sub-headings of the paper to navigate through to information of interest; 2) use diagrams and tables in the paper to gain insight into information quickly; 3) use the opening and closing sentences in paragraphs to establish where to find items of interest.
9. *Scan for relevance:* Rarely, a paper does need to be read word-for-word. But this is not common. Normally, if a student is looking for "evidence supporting X" they will find this by scanning, e.g., the "Results" section of a paper, or (when looking for theoretical grounding), the "Literature Review".