

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 current. The word “journal” comes from the French word *jour* meaning “day or daily”. Most journals are published monthly, quarterly or twice a year.

In a *good* journal, articles undergo a lengthy process of peer review by experts in the field, so you 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 are produced for profit from paying authors desperate to see their articles published.

Steps to reading

To establish whether a journal is quality, and extract information quickly from it, follow the following steps.

1. Use **Ulrichsweb**: A global periodicals listing, Ulrich’s website helps to check if you have a good source. Type the name of the journal into the search box here: <http://ulrichsweb.serialssolutions.com/>
2. **Check the inside (or rear) cover**: The 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—sign that 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 usually has a **volume number** and **issue** number. This is another indicator of a reliably good journal (generally speaking, the longer the history, 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. The title of paper should be relevant to you.

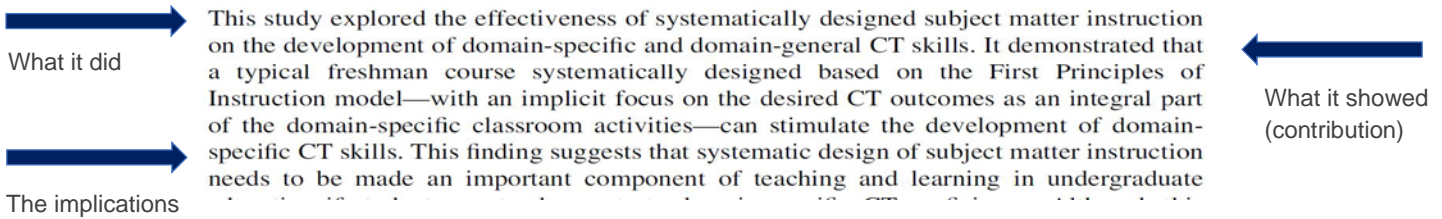


The diagram shows a sample journal article header with annotations. At the top left, a blue arrow points to the text 'Education Tech Research Dev' and 'DOI 10.1007/s11423-015-9417-2'. Below this, a blue arrow points to the text 'Journal name/DOI: should be well-known in your discipline area'. In the center, a grey bar contains the text 'DEVELOPMENT ARTICLE'. Below this, a blue arrow points to the title 'Systematic design of a learning environment for domain-specific and domain-general critical thinking skills'. At the bottom left, a blue arrow points to the authors 'Dawit Tibebe Tirunch¹ · Ataklti G. Weldeslassie² · Abraham Kassa³ · Zinaye Tefera³ · Mieke De Cock⁴ · Jan Elen¹'. At the bottom right, a blue arrow points to the text 'Authors: should be from reputable institutions (usually universities)'. On the right side of the header, there is a CrossMark logo.

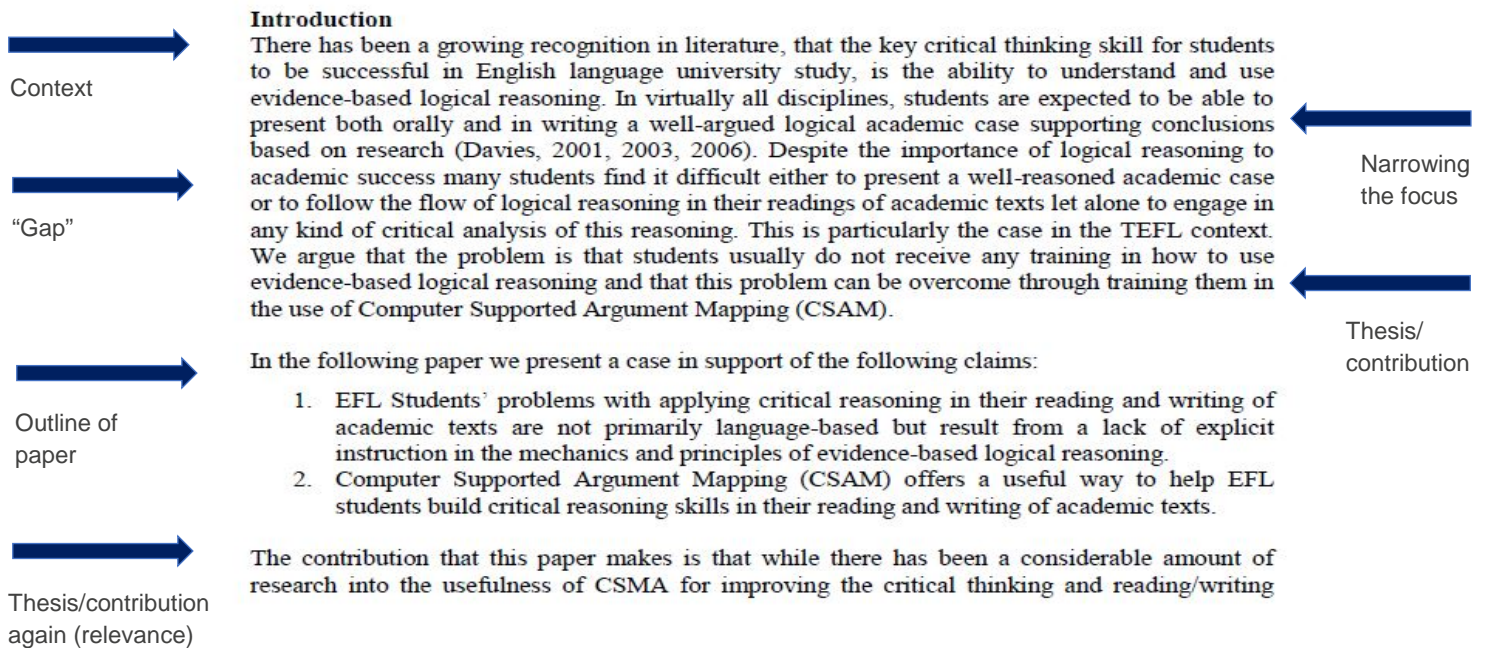
5. **Look at the Abstract**: Once you have established that you have a reputable journal, look at the Abstract. The aim of an abstract is to summarise the key points from each part of the article: the introduction (aim/purpose), method, results, and discussion (sometimes a **Structured Abstract** lists 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, discard the paper; if it seems useful, read on.
6. **Read the Conclusion**: This might be clearly marked as such, or it might not. Either way, there will be one. If it is not marked with a sub-heading, “Conclusion”, look for indicator words like: “In conclusion...”, “In sum...”, “In the final analysis..” etc. The 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 on.

Conclusion



7. **Read the Introduction:** The introduction has several jobs: 1) to situate the topic in a wider scholarly context; 2) to narrow from this general topic to a specific focus; 3) to 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 the paper and anticipate the author’s conclusions.



8. **Skim read the paper:** Once you are certain the Abstract, Conclusion and Introduction establish a useful paper, then: 1) use the sub-headings to navigate 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 needs to be read word-for-word. But this is not common. Normally, if you are looking for “evidence supporting X” you will find it by scanning, e.g., in the “Results” section of a paper, or when looking for theoretical grounding, in the “Literature Review”.

Other helpsheets available

- Reading and Writing Critically
- Reading Strategies: Questioning