How To Read a Journal Article

While every peer-reviewed journal article will be slightly different, as is your interest level, there are some general guidelines that may help you in getting through these difficult content-rich texts.

Suggested Order of Reading

Read the title, authors, where it comes from (university, country, research NGO, etc.)

• What is the context in which these researchers live and work?
• What might be their motivation for this research?

Read the abstract

• What was their main question?
• Did they get an answer?

Read the introduction

• What is the compelling story driving this research?

Read the conclusion/discussions (sometimes these are in several sections)

• Does their answer suggest we change our thinking/doing?
• Is future research needed to confirm this and, if so, what might that look like?
• What are the limitations to this study?
• What questions do you have about this study?

Go back and read the sections focused on methodology and statistical analysis to address the questions that you have about this study.

Other Things to Remember

Rarely, rarely, RARELY does a researcher work alone. Therefore, don’t read research articles alone—ask others for their understanding. Reach out to others who understand the topic, methods, and/or statistics better than you do and ask for their help. Divide and conquer—get a reading group to break up the whole middle section and teach one another.

Write to the researcher. Yes. They are, more often than not, happy to answer questions about their work. Usually, they are overjoyed that you’ve reached out to show an interest in something they’ve been down multiple rabbit holes to explore.

Fun and Eye-Opening Extra

Read the original research linked to a Huffington Post or Time Magazine article. See if you would boil down/simplify the original research in the same way the Post or Time author did. Caveat emptor: see The Mozart Effect—Mehr SA, Schachner A, Katz RC, Spelke ES (2013) Two Randomized Trials Provide No Consistent Evidence for Nonmusical Cognitive Benefits of Brief Preschool Music Enrichment. PLoS ONE 8(12): e82007. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0082007