Guideline for Analyzing Journal Articles
Christopher M. Weible
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The purpose of this guideline is to help students analyze and critique journal articles that empirically apply one or more theories. The criteria and questions are listed in section one. Strategies for putting the criteria together are discussed in section two. When applying the guideline, consider the strengths and the weakness in relation to each question and do not lose sight of the whole article.

Section One. Criteria and Questions for Analyzing Journal Articles

1. **Research Question/Objective – (i)** What question is the article trying to answer or objective is the article trying to achieve? There might be more than one. **(ii)** To what extent is the question/objective adequately justified as important to answer from the point of view of society and academia?

2. **Main Argument/Findings – (i)** What is the main argument/finding? **(ii)** To what extent is the argument/finding stated clearly and explicitly? **(iii)** To what extent does the main argument adequately answer the research question or achieve the objective?

3. **Contributions to the Literature – (i)** What puzzle in the academic literature does the article attempt to help understand and what gap within that puzzle does the article attempt to help fill? **(ii)** How does the article contribute to understanding the puzzle and filling the gap in the academic literature? **(iii)** To what extent is the contribution to the academic literature justified as a significant advancement?

4. **Theory – (i)** What theoretical approach is used to help guide and interpret the empirical analysis? There might be more than one. **(ii)** What concepts are emphasized and, if interrelated (e.g., in the form of hypotheses), what are the posited the interrelations (in what might be called the "causal process")? It also might be useful to identify the independent and dependent variables, if any. **(iii)** To what extent are the rationales (e.g., mechanisms) underlying the interrelations adequately justified? In other words, are the interrelations backed by sound reasoning? **(iv)** Overall, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical application?

5. **Operationalization – (i)** To what extent are concepts from the theory operationalized (measured) in a transparent and convincing manner? **(ii)** To what extent does concept operationalization (measurement) adequately represent the conceptual or theoretical definition?

6. **Research Design/Data Sources – (i)** What is the research design/data sources (e.g. documents, surveys, interviews)? **(ii)** To what extent are all the steps of gathering and analyzing data described in a manner that is clear and transparent? **(iii)** To what extent are the research design and data gathering methods explicit enough to replicate? **(iv)** Are data limitations adequately addressed? **(v)** How appropriate are the research design/data sources for addressing the research question/objective, contributing to the literature, and for applying the theory?

7. **Tables and Figures – (i)** How clear and informative are the tables and figures? **(ii)** Is there a detailed caption so the table and figure can be understood without searching the text? **(iii)** Do the variable names make sense? **(iv)** Are significant impacts clearly marked in the tables and figures? **(v)** To what extent are the tables and figures effective in expressing the main argument?

8. **Analytical Techniques – (i)** How appropriate are the analytical techniques (statistical or other) given the data, research questions, and research design? **(ii)** Do the data provide clear support for the main argument? **(iii)** Does the author adequately discuss dissonant findings and alternate interpretations?

9. **Generalizability – (i)** To what extent does the author seek to generalize their basic argument to the context studied and to other contexts? **(ii)** How valid are the generalizations?

10. **Implications – (i)** What are the policy implications from the article for theory and practice? **(ii)** In what ways are the implications drawn from the arguments, research design, and data? **(iii)** Are the policy implications adequately justified as important to society? **(iv)** To what extent do the next steps for research (if any) build from the article?

11. **Clarity of Writing – (i)** Is the article well-written? **(ii)** Is the writing clear? **(iii)** Could the article be written more succinctly?

Section Two. Putting the criteria together and reading a journal article.
Sometimes it is useful to have a strategy for applying the criteria above.

Quick Read

Step 1. Read the title and abstract. Then skim through the whole paper taking about 10 seconds to get a feel for the question/objective, theory, research methods/data sources and main argument. Decide whether this article contributes to your current research objectives before investing any more time and effort.
Step 2. Read the introductory section. The introductory section usually starts with a broad introductory sentence/paragraph before narrowing down to the particular focus or topic of the article. Look for the contribution to the literature, main arguments, theoretical approach, and research question/objective. Sometimes the basic argument is not mentioned in the introduction or only foreshadowed.
Step 3. Read the conclusions and scan the tables and figures. Look for more details about the main arguments and the theoretical approach. The main arguments are often in the first paragraph in the conclusion, the last paragraph of the introduction, or in the abstract. Get a sense of the theoretical approach, which will be much quicker if stated in hypotheses. You will usually find a statement about the generalizability and the policy implications near the end of the conclusion.

Steps 1 through 3 should take about 10 minutes or less. At this point, you should have a good sense of the article and be able to answer some of the questions related to the **r**esearch question/objective, the contribution to science, the policy implications, generalizability, basic theoretical approach, and the basic arguments.

Thorough Read

Step 4. Read the article through. The last sentence of the introduction usually describes the general layout of the paper. As you read the paper you will come across the theory and methods sections. Identify more details of the theoretical approach and the research design/data sources. Look for the expectations, propositions, or hypotheses. Usually there is a section on the case study or topic. Does the article justify the importance of the case and topic?

Check out the tables and figures. Identify, if any, the independent and dependent variables. What analytical techniques (e.g., statistics) are used? Are the variables in the tables/figures clearly and consistently labeled? Is it easy to connect the variable label with the hypotheses, operationalization, and concept? Does the author describe the layout of each table and figure? Does the author adequately describe the methods used, explain why a particular method is used, and provide a clear and thoughtful interpretation of the results? How robust are the results?

At the end of the article is a section for discussions and conclusions. Does the author discuss the limitations of the article and the generalizability of the findings (usually found near the end of the conclusion)? Check again for the main arguments, research questions/objectives, theoretical approach, policy implications, and the contribution to science and assess whether they all fit together into a coherent whole. You might want to go back and reread sections of the paper to check for the consistency of the parts. Do the descriptive/empirical approach, data sources, and research design support the main arguments, answer the research question/achieve the objective, and support the claimed contributions to the literature? What have you learned from this result? What is the important insight? What new research questions arise as a result of this paper, or are new directions for future research identified?

Completing steps 1 through 4 can take more than an hour. You will probably want to reread all or parts of the article and skip back and forth to critique and analyze it.