How to Read a Primary Research Article in Communication Studies

Authors

Take note of the authors and their institutional affiliations. Do these affiliations affect the research? Could there be bias?

Abstract
A brief summary of the key points in the article

Introduction & Background

Identify the BIG QUESTION, e.g. what is this paper about? What problem is this entire field trying to solve? This helps you focus on why this research is being done. Look out for agenda-motivated research. Write the big question here.

{paraphrase from this section}

Introduction & Background

Identify the SPECIFIC QUESTION, e.g. what exactly are the authors trying to answer with their research? What gap is it filling? There may be multiple questions, or just one. Write them here.

{paraphrase from this section}

Literature Review/Past Studies/References

What work has been done before in this field to answer the BIG QUESTION? What are the limitations of that work? What context does this provide for the big question? Can you start to identify the important papers in this field for this topic? What, according to the author, needs to be done next?

{paraphrase from this section}
Design/Methods

Identify the approach. What are the authors going to do to answer the Specific Question(s)? Does this approach seem appropriate?

{paraphrase from this section}

Design/Research Method/Data Collection

Summarize what the authors did, either by drawing a diagram or writing an outline. What methodology did they use? Was it quantitative (such as surveys) or qualitative (such as a focus group interviews)? What was the sample size? How did they measure their concept, theory, or application?

{paraphrase from this section}

Results

Do the results answer the SPECIFIC QUESTION(s)? What do you think they mean? Start to form your own interpretations, independently.

{quote directly from this section}

Discussion/Conclusion

What do the authors think the results mean? Do you agree? Is there an alternative way of interpreting the results? Do you see any that the authors missed? Don't assume they are infallible! What do they propose to do as a next step? Do you agree with that?
Reputation of Study

What do the other experts in the field think about this paper? Do they have criticisms of the study that you haven’t thought of, or do they generally support it? Did the paper get cited by other researchers? Have newer articles been published on this topic? Is the information somehow obsolete?

Tips: In Google Scholar, search for the article and look for the “Cited by” links. In Communication & Mass Media Complete, use the "Times Cited" link. For other options go to the “Citation Tracking” tab on your LibGuide.