How to Identify Scholarly Articles

Most scholarly articles share a few specific traits that make them easy to recognize, especially compared to popular articles. The following description of a scholarly article is intended to be general, and may not describe every scholarly article, but should help you become more familiar with identifying them. Keep in mind that, aside from the abstract and the list of references, the different sections described below may or may not be clearly labeled in each article. Often this varies by discipline. The sections in italics below are found almost exclusively in articles based on primary research, usually from the sciences or social sciences.

Abstract

An abstract is a summary of the contents of the article, intended to help readers determine the potential interest and value of an article. Abstracts are often, but not always, written by the author of the article itself. You should always read the abstract before you read the article, and abstracts are a great way to determine whether or not the article itself might be a useful resource for you.

Introduction

Almost every scholarly article begins with an introduction, briefly laying out the rest of the article, but offering a little more detail than the abstract. Usually this is a place for the author to make his/her case for why this article is relevant. If the article is based on primary research, it may also include the reasons why the research project was originally conducted.

Literature Review

A literature review is basically a summary of other research and articles related to the subject of the article. Literature reviews summarize what research has been done on this topic in the past, and often identify a gap in the literature available that the article at hand is intended to fill. In many disciplines, a formal literature review is one of the required components of an article, and is a separately labeled section. However, in the humanities, the literature review is often found scattered throughout the main body of the article, as the author brings up points in different articles and answers them based on their own thoughts and research.

Methodology

Found in papers based on primary research, this section describes the methods used to conduct the research. This allows other researchers to evaluate the validity of the methods used, and also shares needed information if they wish to conduct a similar study themselves.

Findings

This section is found in papers based on primary research, and gives some of the raw data that was obtained during the research process. This section often contains graphs and tables, which are supported by text describing the results more clearly.
Discussion

This section is where the author discusses the results of the research and what meaning and value those results might have. In many research articles, this section will be the most lengthy. In some articles, they may also discuss the limitations of the current research.

Further Research

Many research articles include a call for others to contribute by suggesting future research projects expanding on the research just described. This might include similar studies conducted in different environments for verification, or suggestions based on the limitations of the previous research.

Conclusion

Almost every article has a conclusion, in which the author wraps up his or her arguments, and again summarizes some of the information in the previous sections.

Bibliography/References/Works Cited

Every scholarly article should include a list of the works cited within the article. The format will vary by discipline and the particular journal in which the article is published. This list is included for several reasons. One of the most important is to give credit to those authors whose works informed the article at hand. The author also supports the value of his own work by citing sources that are deemed credible and valuable. Lastly, this also gives the reader a list of additional resources on that particular topic, if they are interested in reading more.