HOW TO READ AN ACADEMIC ARTICLE

Intro to Comparative Politics, Fall 2020

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WHAT'S AN ACADEMIC ARTICLE?

- Theory-building
  - Propose ideas about politics
  - Examples: Huntington, Tilly
- Empirical research
  - Test hypotheses based on theories
  - In peer-reviewed journal, cites sources
  - Examples: Thies

- Policy analysis
  - Short, focused on recommendations and application to current events
  - Example: Wimmer
- Literature review
  - Summarizes existing academic empirical research
  - Example: Levitsky and Murillo

STRUCTURE OF A RESEARCH ARTICLE

- **Abstract**: A one-paragraph summary of the entire article. It should include the paper's hypothesis (what it is testing) and a description of key results.

- **Introduction**: The introduction should summarize the entire article in slightly more detail. It will explain why the question the researcher is asking is interesting, what contrasting theories exist to answer the question, and what method they are using to answer the question.

- **Literature Review**: This will explain what research has already been done on the question, why that research isn't enough, and should end with a specific hypothesis.

- **Methods**: This section explains how the researchers tested their question (statistics, interviews, etc.)

- **Data**: A description of the sources of data for the research

- **Results and Analysis**: What they found and what it means. Statistical tables and graphs will be found here.

- **Conclusion**

GENERAL TIPS

- Read the abstract, introduction, and section headers first.
  - If you are looking for your own articles, the abstract will tell you whether this article is worth looking at.
  - A well-written introduction will tell you everything you need to know about the research.
- Read the tables and graphs.
  - For statistical analysis, they should tell you everything you need to know about the results.
- Look for answers to key questions rather than reading straight through.
  - Don't get bogged down reading about the methods! Figure out what general type of research you are reading (historical case study vs statistics, for example) and then focus on evaluating the research based on the criteria I give you for that type.
  - Sometimes you want to read the "literature review" section – when an issue is new to you, it can tell you what else you should read to learn about it – sometimes you can just skip it.
  - The conclusion is almost never worth reading.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

What is the argument?

- What is the hypothesis (including independent and dependent variables)?
- What would make that hypothesis true or false?
- What alternate explanations need to be considered?

What is the evidence?

- What kind of data is used? What is the source of the data?
- How is the data measured? Does it measure the variables in the hypothesis?
- What are the limits on the data (time frame, geographic, e.g.)?
- Is important evidence (cases or data) missing?

What is the methodology?

- How did the author use the evidence to make her case?
- Did the method test what would be needed to make the hypothesis true or false?
- What are the controls? Are they the right ones?

What is the conclusion?

- What does the author say are the results?
- Is the author describing a correlation or a cause?
- Did the results match what would be needed to make the hypothesis true or false?
- How far can you extend the argument (to other cases/times)?
- What are the implications of the conclusion?

What is your assessment?

- Do you think the author's conclusions were justified? Why or why not?
  - If yes, what follow-on research do you think would be interesting?
  - If no, how would you disprove the argument?
  - If maybe, what are the limitations of the argument? How would you change the research design to make the argument stronger?