

Common Structures of Academic Texts

Most uni courses require a lot of reading, and it's much easier to get what you need out of a text if you know where it's likely to be. This means you need to know a bit about the typical ways that academic texts of various kinds are organised. Probably the most common types you will encounter *in print* are journal articles, books, and reports, and perhaps primary sources. *Web-based materials* come in a greater variety of forms, often with many layers of information that readers can move around by clicking on links. Sometimes material on the web is identical to the print version, but has been put on the web so that more users can access it; many of the journal articles and public documents you read are of this kind. Other materials, however, have been created for presentation online, and are not usually addressed to an academic audience.

How do web-based texts differ from print-based ones? See the box below for a comparison.

Many web-based materials do not have the "linear" structure that is familiar from print resources, which are designed to be read from beginning to end (though you may choose to read only some parts). Because we cannot see the whole text at once, usually web pages provide some guidance as to how the material has been divided and how the parts are related. To help us "navigate" around texts online, there may be

- a list of contents in the middle of the page
- a list down the left-hand or right-hand side of the page
- and/or tabs across the top of the page that may have drop-down menus with the "contents" of a particular section.

When using a web resource, take a few minutes to get a sense of what is included and how it is structured, before you plunge in.

Within the text, as you read, you will come across coloured "hyperlinks" that you can click on to move to someplace where that topic is dealt with in more detail, often in some other source beyond the document you are reading. It's very helpful to have this immediate access to further layers of information. However, it can also distract you from the main text you are reading, and it's possible to get lost! Notice whether you need to close the linked document to return to your original text, or whether you can use a "back" arrow at the top left on your screen.

In this guide, we focus on some characteristic structures of *academic* texts, which are designed for "linear" reading even if a version is also available online as well in print.

Journal articles (/book chapters). Unlike textbooks that aim to introduce you to a field of knowledge, journal articles (and, similarly, chapters by different authors that have been collected in edited books) are not addressed to students but to fellow scholars, and you may find them difficult to read because it's like stepping into the middle of an unfamiliar conversation. However, it is here that you find particular scholars' new (and often contested) ideas. Articles tend to have a characteristic structure of "moves" that serves to share new information, and interpret its meaning and significance for others in the field. If you expect and look for these "moves", you can often get a good sense of a writer's purpose from the start.

If academics want to get something published, they have to convince editors and reviewers that they are making a contribution to the discipline community by adding something to its discussion of a topic of common interest. This may be new information, or a new perspective on known information, or a challenge to established interpretations in this area. The opening paragraphs of an article commonly do this work, with some combination of the following “moves”:

- what topic this article is focussing on;
- the scholarly context, i.e. what has already been said about this topic by other scholars;
- what aspect this article is investigating;
- what question or problem the writer is raising about this;
- what the writer’s own idea about it is going to be;
- how they are going to show this.

(Students are sometimes confused by encountering ideas at the start of an article that seem to be in conflict with other ideas that follow after; but if you understand that those early ideas, held by people other than the author of the article, make up the *context* for the author’s new suggestion, you will not mistake them for the author’s own viewpoint.)

See below for an example of “moves” in an article abstract:

This comes from the first page of an article referred to earlier in this Guide: Nel, E., Binns, T., and Motteux, N. (2001). Community-based development, non-governmental organizations and social capital in post-apartheid South Africa. *Geografiska Annaler Series B: Human Geography*, 83(1), 3-13. Like many articles, it has an “abstract” before the article begins, summarising its purpose and content.

Abstract	“Moves”
Community-based development strategies are gaining in credibility and acceptance in development circles internationally and notably in post-apartheid South Africa. In parallel, the concept of social capital and the role of supportive nongovernmental organizations are receiving attention as key catalytic elements in encouraging and assisting community-based initiatives. In this paper, a well-documented initiative, the Hertzog Agricultural Co-operative in Eastern Cape province, is re-examined after the passage of several years to assess the impact of social capital and the involvement of a particular non-governmental organization in ensuring the sustainability and economic survival of the project. While both elements have proved critical to the project’s life-cycle, particularly in recent years, concerns over possible dependency and project sustainability exist.	Context of current practice Context of current theory Focus Question (how does a case reflect on key aspects of theory?) Findings

In an abstract, the “moves” are close together because an abstract is brief. In an article, it may take several paragraphs, or even a couple of pages, to reach the writer’s main idea (and that is the case in this particular article). When you think you have found it, you can check by going straight to the end of the article, because the main idea is usually restated in the conclusion.

Skimming an article. Then, you can get an overview of how the argument develops by reading just the first sentence of each paragraph in turn. In Australian academic writing, the point of each paragraph is commonly in the first (“topic”) sentence, and the rest of the paragraph develops that point with more explanation, evidence, and / or example. (In American writing, the point is often in

the last sentence of the paragraph, so you may need to look for it there!) Skimming the article in this way – introduction, conclusion, then topic sentences – takes only a few minutes, and can save you from making lots of unnecessary notes as people often do just because they’re not sure what’s going to turn out to be important. Once you have this overview, then read the article more thoroughly.

Books. In the kind of book where different authors have contributed chapters to a collection, each chapter is likely to have the same sort of structure as a journal article (but in addition, look out for an introduction to the book, and/or an introduction to each section, that summarises the various contributions and relates them to each other. This can be *very* helpful to you!).

In the kind of book where the whole thing is written by one (or more) author together, the structure is likely to be similar to an article, but more spread out because a book is on a larger scale. For example, the whole first chapter of the book is likely to do the same job as the opening, introductory paragraphs of an article; the second chapter may provide the scholarly context; and so on.

Research articles. One particular kind of article has a different structure, which you can also read more efficiently if you know what to expect. While all academic articles discuss the meaning of evidence in relation to some question, not all of them present original evidence discovered by the authors themselves. Many do, however, present the results of some original research project (= a “study”) the authors have undertaken, and these are often called “research articles”. These are likely to have a structure based on the scientific value of objectivity, in which the research is carried out and the findings recorded before the researcher interprets what those findings mean. This probably doesn’t really match the research process, because we can’t help thinking about what our discoveries might mean all the way through the process of discovering them! However, the format of the research article keeps these things separate, and organises the material into sections that typically have these headings:

“**IMRD**” structure (Introduction, **M**ethod, **R**esults, **D**iscussion)

Heading	What is in this section
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstract • Introduction • Method • Results • Discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary of article • What we wanted to find out • What we did to find that out • What we found out • What we think it means

Sometimes there is another section, a “Literature review” between the Introduction and the Method section, where the authors discuss what other work has been done before by other scholars, and how their own research relates to that. However, this discussion is often included in the Introduction, without a separate section.

An efficient way to read this kind of article is to read the Introduction, so you know what question the authors set out to answer, and then move straight to the Discussion, where you find out what they think their answer is. Then you can go back and look at the method and results, which may make more sense once you know what they led to. Especially in a “quantitative” study (one that sets out to find numbers/percentages of something), the methods and results sections are likely to have a good deal of information about statistical operations. This has to be there so that scholars can

judge how well the study was conducted, but you are unlikely to need to make notes on it, and it's helpful to get an overview of the study before returning to the more technical parts.

Reports. A report has a different structure, and again, the structure is shaped by the purpose and audience for the text. Usually a report has been “commissioned”: that is, some organisation has asked a researcher(s) to focus on some particular problem or question, with the purpose of recommending a course of action. The researchers have been given some “terms of reference”, setting out the purpose and scope of what the organisation wants them to do. Usually their work includes a review of the literature relevant to their investigation, and a process of gathering new information on which to base their recommendations. The report they produce begins with an “Executive Summary” or simply “Summary”, which sets out briefly what the project was for and what it found out, so this is where your reading must start. Then there is a detailed list of contents, in chapters with numbered sections, so it is easy for you to find the most relevant parts for your own purposes. The body of the report is often followed by one or more Appendices containing the raw information that is discussed in the report, and a list of references is given before or after those appendices.

Many people find reports easier to read than academic books or articles, because they are not designed to test a theory nor to explore all of the complexity and contradictions that scholars are engaged with. Reports are more practically-oriented, and written to be understood by educated but non-specialist readers. Like academic texts, they are in formal, correct English. However, much of the material in reports is presented in point form, which, again, makes it easier to “see” than in the densely-argued paragraphs often found in academic texts. (You may wonder, for this reason, why all writing is not like this! But academic writing is perhaps more suited to the exploration of theoretical complexities at greater depth, and often without resolution. Point form shows how a topic breaks down into parts, but paragraph form is better suited to showing how the parts are related.)

Primary sources, the raw material that researchers go to, may be fiction, letters, diaries, media reports, public or private records of many kinds -- all sorts of things. They weren't written to present any main idea to an academic or professional readership, so you're not looking for a problem, an argument, or conclusions. You'll read with questions that you bring from the subject you're doing, and make notes of anything that helps you to answer those.