WRT 205

Reading Scholarly Articles

As we already know, writing comes in many different 'flavors.' One of the key distinctions we can draw is between scholarly and popular texts. Understanding which category a text fits into helps us to appreciate what it is, what it offers, and how to read it.

Feature	Scholarly	Popular
Author	Credentialed expert in the subject matter under consideration—typically a professor or other academic with advanced degrees in that field. Often (but not always) affiliated with a college/university. Typically has long-term commitment to this field of study, often with multiple publications on the same subject.	May have some individual expertise in the subject matter, but may also be a generalist or a different sort of specialist. Often a journalist or professional writer. May have an extensive record of publication on multiple subjects, not just this area.
Audience	Typically other credential experts and/or students in the field of study, people with high level of background knowledge and familiarity with the terms, methods, and practices of this type of research	May be much broader, including people without significant background knowledge or training in the subject area
Purpose	To communicate the most current knowledge on a given subject, to engage in scholarly debates about ongoing research, and to share findings from studies with other interested scholars. Often has practical aim of provoking further research.	To communicate information about topics that may be interesting to readers of a particular publication and/or to promote interest in a given subject. Often provides a diluted version of information with less detail than scholarly texts.
Style	Tends to include technical jargon that's most meaningful to experts in the subject; graphic elements that communicate data (i.e. tables, charts, graphs); and rigorously structured segments (see page 2). May be challenging for non-expert readers.	Tends to be accessible to readers with at least a high school education. Often makes use of graphic elements for decoration and/or explanation. More likely to be narrative/conversational in style, as opposed to formal.
Use of research	Will include footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical citations (or a combination thereof), along with a bibliography. Builds extensively on the work of others, and carefully credits those intellectual debts. Research is very visible within the text.	May include embedded links and/or references to source material (often by attribution: "*according to X…..*" rather than using formal citation practices). May exclude in-text references and supply only a bibliography. May not substantially credit source material at all.

Most scholarly articles use a pretty standard organization that's intended to

- Make the text readable and comprehensible
- Situate that text within a larger body of work in the field
- Present the unique findings of this work in a credible way that other researchers can use
- Provide adequate discussion of the background and implications of this work

Understand these features, and you can wade through challenging work even if you're not the target audience and don't have a ton of background knowledge to work with.

How do these texts work?

While there are some variations among disciplines (particularly in the names given to various segments), the typical organizational pattern looks like this:

- **Introduction** (statement of research question, hypothesis, and central claim)
- **Literature review** (explanation of the foundations of this research—run-through of key texts in the field that this research is responding to/utilizing/building upon)
- Overview of this particular research/experiment/study (usually the bulk of the article)
    - **Methodology**—what they did and how
    - **Data**—what they found (often includes statistical info and graphics)
    - **Interpretation** of findings—what they think it means
- **Discussion** of implications—how this work contributes to the field, what it can be used for, what questions it raises for future work, etc.

That format might look pretty familiar—it's very similar to lab reports you might have written for a course—tell us what you were going to look at, how you went about it doing it, what your results were, and what you've learned. This, in fact, is why you were required to take a lab science course at some point—not because we expected you all to end up as laboratory scientists, but because it's important for you to understand the processes by which we create and share new knowledge.

When it comes to reading this sort of work, then, I suggest

- Taking time to **read the abstract and the introduction** to determine the authors' main points—doing this will help you to better understand the rest of the article
- Skimming the article first to **identify the different segments**, so that you can determine where to spend your time (i.e. which sections matter most to what you need to know. You may, for example, not need to spend a ton of time sifting through the data if what you're primarily interested in are the main findings and/or the application
- Paying **close attention to the 'bookends' of the text**—the intro and the conclusion—where the author(s) will lay out their key take-aways
- In other words, sometimes it's okay to *not* read every single paragraph deeply, so long as you're able to **follow the trajectory of the argument**. And don't just read sequentially, start to finish—flip back through the text to refresh your memory, understand how the pieces fit together, and clarify information you have questions about.