What is a scholarly article?

Scholarly articles are written by professionals and published in academic journals, some peer reviewed, some not. The peer reviewed, and some editor-reviewed articles have gone through a rigorous process of ‘peer’ review before being accepted for publication in a journal. Scholarly articles serve a number of purposes: many present original research findings by the author(s), and commonly this research is used to support or refute an existing theory, or to advance a new theory. Other articles review the literature on a particular topic in order to summarize a related body of research findings; these can be text-based or numerically based reviews. Still others may present a new or modified research methodology (a way of collecting or analyzing data). What makes these articles “scholarly” is that the author(s) is (are) carefully constructing an argument that is based on evidence generally collected along the lines of the scientific methods.

Some suggestions on how to read a scholarly article

The first goal of reading any scholarly article is to understand the context. To do this, first identify the author’s purpose in writing the article. Is he/she sharing original research? Presenting a new theory? Summarizing the literature in order to make a particular argument or developing a new or extending an old methodology? At this point, it can also be helpful to identify for whom the article is written – peers, students, or an audience outside of the field, among others.

Next, identify what the author's main conclusion is and what evidence he/she uses in favor of that conclusion. Here it is important to understand if the main conclusions are in fact related to the principle aim or ‘purpose’ of the piece of inquiry (research). It's only when you understand the author's views that you are in a position to evaluate the argument and assess whether you agree or disagree with the author and to determine which parts of the article; e.g., methodology, analytics, are persuasive and which parts are not.

Surprisingly, the best way to approach an academic article for the first time is to skim the whole thing before actually reading it. Quickly reviewing the text will give you an idea of the overall structure of the paper, the author's purpose and audience, the author’s writing style, and often, some idea of how the author presents evidence to support his/her point of view. The most important thing to do is locate the author's purpose and main conclusion, as it is (usually) the main thesis that each of the various parts of the article support.
Once you have begun to read the article, start keeping a list of terms and how the author defines or uses them. The strength of the author's argument as a whole often depends upon the extent to which he/she can win the assent of the reader to particular definitions of specific terms. Many arguments about the morality of abortion, to give you one example, depend heavily upon a specific definition of personhood. Sometimes during the course of the article the author will redefine a term, and if so, it's important to keep track of what the author's motivations are for adopting a different definition.

You should also keep a list of the evidence the author uses in support of the main conclusion. In many ways this evidence comes in two forms: (1) the a-priori selection of supporting literature presented in the introduction portion of the paper and (2) the methodology and analytics of data. However, not all scholarly papers present new data. As you might expect, each piece of the author's argument in favor of the main conclusion must itself be justified and this often involves the use of sub-arguments for particular claims supporting the main conclusion.

Articles often contain other persuasive elements, which, while not part of the formal argument, can nevertheless work in the author's favor. An author's writing style, for instance, can serve to present the issues in such a way as to suggest that the author has truly considered all serious objections to his/her position. Vivid or striking examples can be so compelling as to win the reader's assent (e.g. photographs of fetuses at ten weeks are often used by anti-abortionists).

Almost all academic writing has some rhetorical elements-- it's important to recognize and distinguish these forms of persuasion from the author's formal argument.

**Specific suggestions for filling out Part I of the Discussion Sheet**

The first part of the worksheet is meant to help you identify what the author said and how he/she constructs his/her argument based on the evidence presented, the thesis and main conclusion(s) of the article. You should do this part in three steps: (1) skim the article to get a sense of what it is about, (2) read the article once or twice to identify what the author's evidence for the conclusion is, and (3) summarize and identify (reconstruct) the author's argument, rereading sections of the text as necessary.

1. You can find the title of the article and the author(s) name(s) on the very first page of the article. The topic or subject of the article may be contained in the title, but sometimes finding the topic of the article is less straightforward. The title, "A modest proposal," for instance, doesn't tell you what the article is about. Many scholarly articles begin with an abstract, which is a brief summary of the evidence and the conclusions the authors reach based on the evidence (this is a good place to start if there is an abstract). Authors also sometimes introduce the topic of discussion by pointing out its connections to broader issues, and as such, the first paragraph may also be misleading. After skimming the entire article, ask yourself what the article as a whole is about.

Identifying the main thesis or purpose of the article is the very next step. You may find it lurking in an introductory paragraph, as when the author announces his/her intentions: "The purpose of
this article is to demonstrate that capital punishment is wrong." Sometimes it will appear in a concluding paragraph. As noted above, authors often provide sub-arguments for particular pieces of evidence they use to support their main conclusion. So the pitfall you must vigilantly avoid is mistaking a sub-argument for the main argument of the paper. One of the best ways to identify the main conclusion is to consider, if you had to say it in one sentence, what the author(s) would like you to believe about the topic, e.g. "The central claim the author of this article would like the reader to believe is ....")

2. To identify the important terms of the article a useful rule of thumb is that you should (1) write down any terms that are unfamiliar to you, (2) write down any terms the author defines or otherwise characterizes, and (3) consider writing down terms that appear to have important roles in the author's argument. This can be very important for understanding how the author's operationalize important variables in the study.

3. Identify the author's primary evidence for the main conclusions – this step deconstructs the methodology and analytics. What are the author’s conclusions based on? For example, how many participants were in the study and how were they selected? Based on what you know and are able to understand you should be able to articulate in just a few sentences what the author's argument is for his/her main conclusion.

You should be wary of ignoring whole sections of the author's article as unrelated to the argument for the main conclusion or some sub-argument. Peer-reviewed articles have gone through multiple drafts, in which the author has repeatedly attempted to refine the prose of the article to clarify the connections between each of the points raised to the main conclusion and excise unrelated or tangential lines of thought.
DISCUSSION WORKSHEET

PART I. WHAT THE AUTHOR REALLY SAID

1. Directions: Skim the article as a whole to answer the first few questions below and get a sense of the structure of the article and the author's writing style.

CITATION:

PURPOSE OF ARTICLE:

MAIN CONCLUSION:

2. Directions: As you read the article, write down any important/unfamiliar terms and start a list of the reasons or evidence the author provides in favor of the main conclusion (next page).

TERMS: List any terms or concepts that are unfamiliar or appear to be important. If the author provides a definition, be sure to write that down too. Circle any you feel need clarification or discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important terms</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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EVIDENCE: List any evidence the author provides for the main conclusion. Each of these may appear as a sub-conclusion of its own argument. If you spot evidence in favor of a sub-conclusion, list that as well and identify which sub-conclusion it supports. Circle any that you feel need of clarification or discussion.

1) EVIDENCE FOR MAIN CONCLUSION (what/where does the data and how does the analysis of the data lead the author(s) to their conclusions?)

2) EVIDENCE FOR SUB-CONCLUSIONS AND SUB-CONCLUSION SUPPORTED (what/where does the data and how does the analysis of the data lead the author(s) to their conclusions?)

IDENTIFY OTHER PERSUASIVE ELEMENTS. Were there any other aspects of this article, such as the way it was presented, its use of examples, the author's writing style, etc., that made the article persuasive or non-persuasive? List any you find.

3. Directions: After reading the article, complete the following.
SUMMARIZE, using the evidence you found above, state how this evidence leads to the main conclusion. State points directly rather than "he says" or "it's about." (Don't evaluate the argument here.)
PART II. - WHAT I THINK ABOUT THIS - The questions below ask you to evaluate the article.

FIRST REACTIONS. List or write up any reactions you have to the article. Do you agree with the author? Why or why not? (Don't comment on everything--just the things you either strongly agree or disagree with.)

WHERE DOES THE AUTHOR GO WRONG? Remembering the argument you found for the author on page 2, identify what part of the argument, either evidence or the logic linking the premises to the conclusion, you think is mistaken. (Even if you agree with the author, play the devil's advocate by identifying what you consider to be the weakest point of the argument.)

WHAT IS THE STRONGEST PART OF THE AUTHOR'S ARGUMENT? Again, identify one part of the argument you think works well.

DEVELOP YOUR OWN POSITION - State your own position on this issue and sketch how you might support it. (If you find the author's argument compelling, suggest another way one might support the same position.)