

Understanding Scientific Journal Articles

Tips for Advocates and Practitioners

Select Journals Relevant to Violence Against Women Research

Journal of Interpersonal Violence; Violence and Victims; Trauma Violence & Abuse; Journal of Family Violence; Violence Against Women; Aggression & Violent Behavior; Journal of Traumatic Stress; Homicide Studies; Criminal Justice and Behavior

Scientific journals are a great resource for advocates and practitioners. Most journals report the results of empirical studies (new or original research), and others focus exclusively on reviews of the already existing literature (e.g.: *Trauma, Violence and Abuse; Aggression & Violent Behavior*). Other types of articles found in scientific journals include theoretical articles, articles that focus on research methodology, and articles that describe specific case studies. Scientific journals are peer-reviewed (or refereed), meaning that articles are independently reviewed by other experts in the field prior to publication (reviewers or referees). When reviewing articles or manuscripts for potential publication, peer reviewers typically consider whether the study makes a significant contribution, whether it accurately represents and builds upon existing literature, whether legitimate research methods and appropriate samples used, and whether the resulting manuscript is written in a clear and concise way to communicate the study findings. Many peer-reviews are “blind” reviews, meaning that the reviewer does not know the identity of the author. The purpose of keeping the identity of the author from the reviewer is to promote the most unbiased critique or review.

Articles published in most of the journals listed above are prepared in APA-Style which is essentially a set of guidelines published by the American Psychological Association to guide authors in the structure of scientific writing and in preparing manuscripts for publication (the guidelines are found in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th Edition*, which was published in 2001).

Journal articles are typically divided into key sections:

Abstract: the abstract is a summary paragraph that appears at the beginning of a journal article. The abstract describes the primary purpose of the study or what problem is under investigation, the types of subjects or sample used, the experimental method employed, and the key findings that resulted. In the case of review articles which focus on all relevant existing literature, not just one new

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study, the abstract also includes the theoretical construct or idea around which studies will be described or organized. Advocates and practitioners are cautioned not to read just the abstract in order to understand the study results, because abstracts rarely mention any limitations to the study, they report only key findings, and the brevity of the paragraph (typically 120 words) may tend to provide an overly optimistic read of the study and what was found.

Introduction: the earliest section of a journal article states the problem addressed and provides a review of the extant (existing) literature related to the topic being studied. After reviewing related studies, a literature review should highlight the gaps in the literature, and then explain how the current study fills those empirical gaps in knowledge. The section following the literature review should set forth the specific aims or research questions to be asked. In other words, what is the primary purpose of the study and what will it attempt to answer?

Method Section: The methods section of a journal article describes the sample in the study (e.g.: women seeking protective shelter in an urban domestic violence program) and how the subjects were recruited into the study. It should also define key concepts or words (e.g.: for the purpose of this study, stalking is defined as...). Methods sections also spell out the specific experimental design used (e.g.: random assignment of subjects to groups), the methods of data collection (e.g.: type of survey instrument used), and the methods for statistical analysis of the data.

While advocates and practitioners do not need to become experts in research design in order to benefit from a journal article, a basic understanding of this section of an article can give clues to whether the study findings are valid and useful for practice. For example, by looking at who the participants in the study are (i.e.: the sample), you can tell to whom the results of the study might apply (i.e.: generalizability). Would you believe the findings of a study on women's health if the sample was men? What should you say about a study of the impact of domestic violence when the study was limited to women who seek protective shelter. Importantly, results of a study only apply to samples with similar characteristics. Advocates can also consider whether the investigators are using legitimate questionnaires that are scientifically validated (this should be described in the article).

Results: The results section of a journal article summarizes the findings of the data collection and the way in which the data were statistically analyzed.

Discussion: The discussion section highlights the significance of the findings, particularly in the context about what is already known about the topic being

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studied (i.e.: the existing literature). This section describes whether the data answered the research questions that were asked. The discussion should also identify limitations of the study (e.g.: this study cannot be generalized to all rape victims because only those being served by a rape crisis center were studied). Discussion sections also identify questions which need to be answered by future research.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Some journals are now requiring authors to set forth the primary implications of their studies as they relate to policy and practice (e.g.: *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*).

Conclusion: The closing section of the journal article should restate the purpose of the study and primary empirical questions that were asked, and should restate the most significant findings. The concluding paragraph of a journal article should aid the reader in understanding the significance of the study in contributing to the base of knowledge about the subject.

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