## A Guide to Taking Notes on Journal Articles

Taking effective notes as you read articles is an effective and efficient way to organize your thoughts and to eventually help you write papers. In fact, I cannot think of a single more important factor in helping you write a paper. Writing quality notes will *save you substantial time* in the long run. They will help you understand your topic better because you will begin to more easily see commonalities in variables and designs and measures, notice patterns in cited research (key sources you’ll want to look up later), and will begin to see gaps in the existing research. It will make the writing o*f the paper much easier*!

***How does it make the writing of the paper MUCH easier?***

* First, you won't have to waste time going back to an entire journal article and need to read it all over again or struggle to find the parts that are applicable to your paper.
* Next, they can help you organize your thoughts and eventually your introduction by simply moving the article notes around (literally/physically) into various orders until you land upon your desired, most logical organization.
* Further, taking good notes will reduce the chances of accidental plagiarism. If you write your notes in your own words/paraphrased and then write your article from those (instead of looking at the articles themselves), it’s easier to avoid plagiarism.
* Lastly, best of all, if you take care to write the article notes using your own words rather than copying or too closely paraphrasing from the articles, *you’ll already have written much of your paper along the way*! You are then in a position of copying and pasting your own words into your paper, with minimal tweaking or adjustment.

I’ve provided you with a format or “template” that I tend to like, ***but by all means, use any format that makes sense to you***. These are for you, not me. I’ve also provided *three examples* of completed article notes from previous students. The length of an article note is not as important as how useful it is for you. At first, however, when you do not yet know enough about the literature to decide what is or isn't needed from an article, it is best to ere on the side of including too much information in the notes than too little. An advantage of electronic notes is that you can go back later and edit to suit your needs as your ideas evolve and take shape. Below, I describe the important bits of information I like to include in my article notes.

**My notes on empirical articles tend to focus on the following.**

*You may not need this much information in your notes – pick and choose what works best for you.*

**\***Remember, basically research articles are arguments to convince you that the study is needed, that the hypotheses make perfect sense *given what we do and do not know about the topic*, and that the way the researchers designed their study to test those hypotheses is sound. ***Thus, these are the main things you’ll want to extract from an article: identifying what was the authors’ argument? How did they arrive at it? What gap were they trying to fill with their study?***

* **Reference –** Give the reference for the paper you are reading in APA Style. This way you can copy and paste it into your reference list later. This will save oodles of time.
* **Abstract –** Sometimes you may find it helpful to literally copy and paste the article’s abstract into your document, for a quick, convenient review.
* **Topic –** What is the general area this source focuses on? Be specific.
* **Overall Research Question and Rationale (What is the argument and how do they back it up?) –** What research question is the article you are reading trying to answer? What was the rationale or purpose of the study(ies)? What gap in the literature was it trying to address?
* **Key Research Cited in Article –** Do they mention any research in the Introduction that is relevant to your idea or research project? If so, take special note of that so you can look it up later.
* **Hypotheses** – What was the researchers hypotheses? If there are multiple studies, list them by study. Use these to organize your notes for the results section.
* **(For experimental designs) - Independent Variables (IV) –** What variable(s) are being compared for changes in the DV. How was/were the IV(s) manipulated?
* **(For experimental designs) - Dependent Variables (DV) –** What is being measured? How did the researchers measure the DVs? If there are multiple studies, list them by study.
* **Type of Design –** Note the design used to collect data. Was it correlational or experimental? What type of experimental design was used?
* **Brief Description of Procedure –** (If you did not do so above, consider the following):How was the study conducted? What did participants do in the study? What were they told? What materials/surveys were involved? What happened in the study between consent and debriefing? Was there a cover story that may be useful for your purposes? You may note with bullet points.
* **Key Results Specifically Related to Each Hypothesis –** You should have at least 1 key finding for each hypothesis. What were their key findings? How do they relate to the hypotheses? This is important because you will use this often when writing your Introduction.
* **Other Key Findings Related to your Topic –** Include any additional findings that researchers may not have been originally predicted or that were not central to the purpose of the article, *but may be useful to the study you are developing*.
* **IMPORTANT: Overall Thoughts -** What is this article’s main contribution to the rationale for asking ***your*** research question? How is it relevant to the study you are developing? What can you use to help you build a case for your study or to help you design your study?
* ***\*Summary/Overview\**** *–* I find it very helpful once I’ve read the article and distilled some of the details, to write down in my own words a very brief summary of that the article was about and what was found. These few sentences should focus on the big picture – what the researchers studied (not necessarily how) and what was found (not as in the stats – just the idea.) This can serve as an excellent reminder of the main gist of the article and if written in your own words, it is often very useful as part of your actual paper. Done well and with enough notes, it’s not too difficult to have much of your introduction written before you ever start to “write it.”

**\*Review Papers are a bit different from Empirical Articles.** Review papers summarize and synthesize the current state of understanding of a given topic. They do not typically report new experiments, but rather summarize and draw conclusions based on existing studies. Thus, an article note for a review auricle would look a bit different. For instance, it may consist mostly of sections best labeled: **Key Theories and Ideas –** This should be a summary of the central ideas in the article/chapter. This would take the place of the empirical article note sections on hypotheses, IVs/DVs, Method and Results.

***A few tips for taking notes as you read***

* Plan on reading each article at least twice, probably more. As much as possible, have an idea of which topics/concepts you hope to have in your paper as you read each new article. That way you can pay special attention to those areas as you read the article.
* As you read your source for the first time, highlight key information. It is best to highlight *pieces of information*, not whole sentences. In particular, look for key TOPIC sentences. In short, a topic sentence is the one sentence in a paragraph that indicates what the main idea in that paragraph is about. It is often, though not always the first or second sentence in a paragraph. ***(See Kail, ch. 4 for a full explanation.)***
* As you read, also make notes for yourself in the margins (thoughts you have, how things may relate to your paper, etc.)
* Check the references! *Look through, and highlight any key references so that you can track them down later when you need to find additional articles on your own.*
* After you have read the article, transfer your highlighting and notes to a note sheet (see Article Note Templates below for examples).
* *PARAPHRASE!* As you transfer things over, avoid copying things word for word. This is a great time to start putting things into your own words. Not only will this help you learn the information better, you will be less likely to plagiarize accidentally.
* *Keep your notes short and as succinct as possible*. The idea is that you want to create a source for yourself that is easier to use than the original article (i.e., its much easier to read 1 -2 page of notes than 10-20 pages of an article).
* Remember your notes are a reference *for you*. If there is a lot of information you find useful (e.g. info about a scale), describe it briefly, then include a page number. Ultimately, you will be using these along with the original article.
* Save your work on your computer, and be consistent in your style and organization.
* I like to take my notes either by hand on large note cards or on PPT slides all in one slideshow, but I also use Word or OneNote often. I like the physical cards and PPT because it makes it easier to physically rearrange them in the order that best suits the article I’m trying to craft. Use what you like as long as I can open and read it (Word, NOT Pages; PPT, etc.). I’d avoid pdfs because it’s then more difficult to copy and paste useful bits into your paper (that you have written yourself, of course).

**Article Note Template: An Example**

**Reference:** *Give the proper APA reference entry for this article*

**Abstract (copy here if you want):**

## 

**General Topic:**

**Overall Research Question and Rationale:**

**Key Research and/or Theory:** (Here, you might list a brief summary of key research/theory the researchers used to justify their research/hypotheses).

**Methodology: For experimental designs:**

**IV(s):** *What variable(s) are being compared for changes in the DV?) (NOTE: If there are multiple studies, list them by study). How were they manipulated?*

**DV(s):** *What is being measured? How were they measured? (NOTE: If there are multiple studies, list them by study)*

**Hypotheses: (number them)** *What is predicted about how the IV(s) will influence the DV(s)? (NOTE: If there are multiple studies, list them by study)*

**Type of Design Used:** *(NOTE: If there are multiple studies, list them by study)*

**Very Brief Description of Procedure:** *(Pay special attention to aspects of the stimuli, procedures, measures, cover story, etc.* ***that may be useful or your study****. If there are multiple studies, list them by study)*

**Key Results Specifically Related to Each Hypothesis (number them):** *You should have at least 1 key finding for each hypothesis (NOTE: If there are multiple studies, list them by study)*

**Other Key Findings *Related to Your Topic*:** *(NOTE: If there are multiple studies, list them by study)*

**Overall Thoughts: THIS PART IS VERY IMPORTANT!** *What is this article’s main contribution to the rationale for asking your research question? In other words, how might you use this article in your research or paper?*

**Overview/MY Summary (1 paragraph at most):**

**Example #1: Article Note from an Empirical Article**

**Reference:** Rule NO, Ambady N (2010) Democrats and Republicans Can Be Differentiated from Their Faces. PLoS ONE 5(1): e8773. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0008733

**General Topic:** Can people accurately discern category information from faces of those from perceptually ambiguous groups? In this case, can people tell the difference b/t a Dem and a Pub based on only their face?

**Overall Research Question and Rationale:** Can Democrats and Republicans be differentiated just by looking at their face? The authors noted past research has shown that people could discern social category information such as gay/straight from faces alone so they argued such an effect may extend to other ambiguous social groups, such as political ideology.

**For experimental designs:**

**IV(s):** Study 1: Pictures shown of professional politicians from the 2004 and 2006 U.S. Senate election: (Half were Democrats and half were Republican)

Study 2: Pictures shown of Democrat and Republican college students

Study 3: Pictures shown of different college students (the same as in Study 2)

**DV(s):** Study 1: What political party the participants put the different pictures of the professional politicians in (whether they pressed the “D” or the “R” button)

Study 2: Same as S1

Study 3: Ratings of “power” the participants gave the pictures

**Hypotheses: (number them)**

Study 1: Participants will be able to differentiate Democratic vs. Republican professional politicians by only seeing a picture of their face.

Study 2: Participants will be able to differentiate Democratic vs. Republican college students by only seeing a picture of their face.

Study 3: Participants will give different pictures of the same college students shown in Study 2 particular ratings on the trait dimension scales such that Democrats and Republicans will be able to be differentiated based on their trait dimension ratings (power specifically).

**Type of Design Used:**

All three studies used a within0subjects design, with complete randomization

**Brief Description of Procedure:**

Study 1: Participants were shown 100 pictures (50 D and 50 R) on a computer of professional politicians from the 2004 and 2006 U.S. Senate election and were asked to press the “D” key if participants thought they were Democrat and “R” if Republican.

Study 2: Same as above, but the stimuli were College students

Study 3: Participants were shown the same pictures of the college students in Study 2 and were asked to rate them on different trait dimension scales based on the college students’ facial features.

**Key Results Specifically Related to Each Hypothesis (number them):**

Study 1: “…undergraduate perceivers were able to accurately categorize professional politicians according to their political affiliations at above chance levels”

Study 2: “Political affiliations could be accurately discerned from the faces of college student, as displayed in their senior portraits.”

Study 3: “…Democrats and Republicans were perceived to possess different personality traits based on the appearance of their faces.” Basically, they showed that perception of power was a cue Ps used to make their category judgments. Pubs were seen as having more powerful or dominant faces and so Ps used that as a proxy or cue to inform their decisions about whether the person was a Pub or Dem.

**Other Key Findings *Related to Your Topic*:** None

**IMPORTANT: Overall Thoughts For How This May Be Useful For My Research Ideas:** *What is this article’s main contribution to the rationale for asking your research question? In other words, how might you use this article in your research or paper?*

I have several initial thoughts. First, I’m wondering if this result would extend to largely female faces. Most of the faces in the current study were men. I ask this since one of the main cues people seem to be using to make their decisions was how “powerful” or “dominant” the face looked, with Republican faces being seen as more powerful. If that’s the case, it may be that the effect would not hold with women if their faces do not carry as much “signal” of power or dominance. Next, it may be interesting to see if not only can people discern the category information (whether someone is a D or R), but would they use that information to make other judgments about the person not knowing anything at all about their political affiliation? For example, rather than asking Ps to judge whether the face is a D or R, ask them to judge whether they think the person depicted supports X-position (one that is highly politically divided). If they could do this, it may mean people are unconsciously using subtle facial cues to make all sorts of quick judgments about others.

**Overview/ MY Summary (1 paragraph at most):** The researchers conducted three studies involving graduate students to determine if they could differentiate between Democrats and Republicans based on nothing other than images of their faces. Based on brief glimpses of faces on a computer screen, Ps were able to discern above chance levels the political affiliations of professional politicians and of college students. It seems that one cue Ps may be using to make their accurate judgments is how powerful or dominant the face looks to them, with R faces appearing more dominant than D faces.

**Example #2: Article Note from an Empirical Article**

**Reference:**

Lynch, K. R., Wasarhaley, N. E., Golding, J. M., & Simcic, T. (2013). Who bought the drinks? Juror perceptions of intoxication in a rape trial. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *28*(16), 3205–3222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260513496900>

**Abstract:**

In this study, the perceptions of victim intoxication and the drinking context (i.e., who purchased the drinks) were investigated. Men and women mock jurors (N = 158) read a rape trial summary in which the victim was intoxicated or sober, and either the victim or the perpetrator purchased the drinks. Overall, participants who perceived a victim as intoxicated were less likely to render guilty verdicts and made lower ratings of victim credibility. In addition, when the perpetrator purchased the drinks, participants were more likely to render guilty verdicts and made more negative judgments about the defendant than when the victim bought the drinks. Mediation analyses explained the relationship between the independent variables and verdict. The results are discussed in terms of the factors that influence juror perceptions of rape cases in court.

**Topic:** juror perceptions of intoxication in a rape trial

**Research Question:** What is the impact of victim intoxication and the drinking context (who purchased the drinks) have on juror perceptions in a rape trial?

**Key Research:**

* Society regards women who partake in excessive drinking as diverging from their standard gender role, and therefore not exhibiting socially acceptable behavior
* Women who drink excessively along with women who participate in risk-taking behavior break traditional norms and are subsequently viewed as lacking genuine victim status
* Alcohol consumption by sexual assault victims has been shown to affect perceptions of responsibility for the incident
* Mock jurors and jurors view the intoxicated victim as less credible and more responsible for the assault compared with a non-intoxicated victim

**Brief Methodology:**

* Men and women mock jurors read a rape trial summary in which the victim was intoxicated or sober, and either the victim or the perpetrator purchased the drinks
* Participants then answered various questions concerning the case

**Hypotheses:**

* A main effect of victim intoxication such that participants would render fewer guilty verdicts and have lower pro-victim judgments when the victim was perceived to be intoxicated versus sober
* A main effect of the drinking context such that participants would render more guilty verdicts and have higher pro-victim judgments when the perpetrator bought the drinks than when the victim bought the drinks due to greater responsibility placed on the defendant
* A participant gender main effect such that men would render fewer guilty verdicts and have lower pro-victim judgments than women

**Type of Design:** experimental, between-subjects

**Independent Variables:**

* Victim intoxication: sober or intoxicated
* Drink purchaser: perpetrator or victim
* Participant gender

**Dependent Variables:**

* Verdict: guilty or not guilty; How guilty they believed the defendant to be (1-10); How confident they were in their verdict (1-10); Described what led them to their verdict (open-ended)
* Intoxication level of victim and defendant (1-10); Overall strength of the prosecution’s case (1-10); Credibility of each witness for the prosecution (detective and victim), perceived honesty, believability, and responsibility of the victim (1-10); How much sympathy and anger they felt toward the victim
* Did all this for defendant’s case as well

**Procedure: Details of Importance (see above) – Used 185 Participants. Undergrads**

**Results:**

* All three hypotheses tested were supported (see above)

**Overall Thoughts For How This May Be Useful For My Research Ideas:**

* DVs may be useful to include
* Intoxicated women perceived as lacking “genuine victim status”, wonder if this is similar to how PWMI are viewed in rape cases

**Example #3: Article Note from an Empirical Article**

**Reference:**

Dijkstra, P., & Buunk, B. P. (1998). Jealousy as a function of rival characteristics: An evolutionary perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 24,* 1158-1166.

**Key Research from Intro:**

- if rival better in key areas 🡪 more jealousy (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996)

- Males prefer physical features/age (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Kenrick et al., 1990)

- jealousy 🡪 rival has things valued by others (Mathes, 1991)

**Variable/Design Info:**

IV = 2 (high/low dominance) X 2 (high/low attractiveness) X 2 (Gender of Participant)

DV = Jealousy; Controlled for mate value (own attr to other sex); Between-Subjects Factorial Design

**Hypotheses:**

H1: Males would be more jealous of dominance in rival

H2: Females would be more jealous of physical attractiveness in rival

-how react when current (real or imagined) partner flirts with H/L dominance and H/L attractiveness rival

- each participant received one of 4 profiles/scenarios [described in article]; then asked how they would respond

**Key Results:**

- manips of attr & dominance were effective; high attr pictures seen as more dominant

- females report higher perceived mate value than males

- mate value significantly related to jealousy (low mate value 🡪 more jealous)

- Sig main effect for Phys. Attr (more attr rival 🡪 more jealous); No main effect for Dominance or Gender

- Males more jealous High Dom than Low Dom.;(main effect for Dominance)

- (qualified by attr–more jealous of Dom, when rival low attr)

- Males had no main effect for Phys. Attr; Mate Value was related to jealousy scores

- Females more jealous High Phys Attr than Low Phys Attr; (main effect for Phys Attr)

- Females had no main effect for Dominance or Mate Value;

- report feeling significantly more jealous than several other traits [listed in article]

- a combination of several adjectives (as substitute for jealousy) yielded inconsistent results

**Thoughts/Big Picture:**

- use of pictures created problem of participants inferring characteristics (attr seen as assertive, confident, etc.)

- would be good to look at other traits than dominance (sense humor, kindness, intelligence, etc.)

- checked other affective responses but only jealous was influenced

- participants appeared to have no problem reporting jealousy (despite its negative connotation)

-similar to Bringle article, as well as the Buss article (all 3 of these articles would be good for a section of my paper about evolution & jealousy).