

How to Read a Research Article

As you travel through your criminal justice/criminology studies, you will soon learn that some of the best known and/or emerging explanations of crime and criminal behavior come from research articles in academic journals. This book has research articles throughout the book, but you may be asking yourself, “How do I read a research article?” It is my hope to answer this question with a quick summary of the key elements of any research article, followed by the questions you should be answering as you read through the assigned sections.

Every research article published in a social science journal will have the following elements: (1) introduction, (2) literature review, (3) methodology, (4) results, and (5) discussion/conclusion.

In the introduction, you will find an overview of the purpose of the research. Within the introduction, you will also find the hypothesis or hypotheses. A hypothesis is most easily defined as an educated statement or guess. In most hypotheses, you will find that the format usually followed is: If X, Y will occur. For example, a simple hypothesis may be: “If the price of gas increases, more people will ride bikes.” This is a testable statement that the researcher wants to address in his or her study. Usually, authors will state the hypothesis directly, but not always. Therefore, you must be aware of what the author is actually testing in the research project. If you are unable to find the hypothesis, ask yourself what is being tested and/or manipulated, and what are the expected results?

The next section of the research article is the literature review. At times the literature review will be separated from the text in its own section, and at other times it will be found within the introduction. In any case, the literature review is an examination of what other researchers have already produced in terms of the research question or hypothesis. For example, returning to my hypothesis on the relationship between gas prices and bike riding, we may find that five researchers have previously conducted studies on the increase of gas prices. In the literature review, I will discuss their findings, and then discuss what my study will add to the existing research. The literature review may also be used as a platform of support for my hypothesis. For example, one researcher may have already determined that an increase in gas causes more people to roller skate to work. I can use this study as evidence to support my hypothesis that increased gas prices will lead to more bike riding.

The methods used in the research design are found in the next section of the research article. In the methodology section you will find the following: who/what was studied, how many subjects were studied, the research tool (e.g., interview, survey, observation . . .), how long the subjects were studied, and how the data that were collected were processed. The methods section is usually very concise, with every step of the research project recorded. This is important because a major goal of the researcher is “reliability,” or, if the research is done over again the same way, will the results be the same?

The results section is an analysis of the researcher’s findings. If the researcher conducted a quantitative study (using numbers or statistics to explain the research), you will find statistical tables and analyses that explain whether or not the researcher’s hypothesis is supported.

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If the researcher conducted a qualitative study (nonnumerical research for the purpose of theory construction), the results will usually be displayed as a theoretical analysis or interpretation of the research question.

Finally, the research article will conclude with a discussion and summary of the study. In the discussion, you will find that the hypothesis is usually restated, and perhaps a small discussion of why this is the hypothesis. You will also find a brief overview of the methodology and results. Finally, the discussion section will end with a discussion of the implications of the research, and what future research is still needed.

Now that you know the key elements of a research article, let us examine a sample article from your text.

Saving the Children: The Promise and Practice of *Parens Patriae*, 1838–1998

Alexander W. Pisciotta

Crime & Delinquency, Vol. 28, pp. 410–425, 1982

1. What is the thesis or main idea from this article?

◆ The thesis or main idea is found at the end of the introduction of this article. Pisciotta directly states on page 412, “. . . it is the purpose of this study to assess the validity of the assumptions underlying the doctrine of *parens patriae* as it was applied before the founding of the juvenile court in 1899.”

2. What is the hypothesis?

◆ The hypothesis is also found in the introduction of this article. Following the stated purpose of the research, Pisciotta concludes the introduction with his research statement regarding *parens patriae*, which is stated as: “Justices across the country, throughout the 19th century, invoked *parens patriae* on premises which were, at best, questionable” (p. 413). In other words, Pisciotta is interested in the validity of the rehabilitation process of wayward juveniles.

3. Is there any prior literature related to the hypothesis?

◆ As you may have noticed, this article does not have a separate section for a literature review. However, you will see that Pisciotta devotes a section related to the literature in the introduction. Here, Pisciotta spends a considerable amount of time discussing court rulings based on the rehabilitative principles delineated in *Ex parte Crouse*. This is to lead the reader into understanding the effect of the precedent established in *Ex Parte Crouse* and how, in support of Pisciotta’s hypothesis, the invoking of *parens patriae* was based on an unfounded premise due to the lack of internal research in juvenile institutions.

4. What methods are used to support the hypothesis?

◆ Pisciotta’s methodology is known as a historical analysis. In other words, rather than conducting his own experiment, Pisciotta is using evidence from history to support his hypothesis regarding the questionability of invoking *parens patriae* in the 19th century. When conducting a historical analysis, most researchers use archival material