Understanding Academese

Do academic articles confuse you? You’re not alone. Here’s a tip: stop reading academic articles like you would your favorite novel from start to finish, and instead, navigate them strategically, recognizing which parts of the article are most important for your needs. Academic articles generally follow a predictable outline, which you can use to your advantage.

Articles in the sciences and social sciences, which report on original researcher studies, should start with an abstract, and then follow this outline: an introduction, a literature review, a method section, the results of the experiment with tables and graphs, a discussion, and a conclusion or implication section. Sometimes, not all of these sections will be there, or they may be combined with one another. But recognizing the purpose of each part will help you navigate the article.

Articles written in the humanities might not use the same headings as those in the sciences, or no heading at all, but will have similar sections if you can recognize them. The beginning of the article will be an introduction providing overview and context. This may include or be closely followed by a summary of the academic conversation surrounding the topic. The body of the paper will contain sub points to the argument. The end of the article should summarize the research and discuss the conclusions or implications of the research.

As a strategy, first read through the abstract, the introduction, and the conclusion of any given article. This will give you an overview of the main points of the paper. Then, delve deeper. Read through the discussion or useful parts of the body of the paper. Consider the implications. Decide what information will help you with your research. Unless the methodology and results, including the uber-technical visuals, has a direct bearing on your understanding, leave these until last, since they tend to be harder to understand.