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On Reviewing and Writing a Scholarly Article

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Abstract: This article provides guidelines for reviewing and writing scholarly articles for the professional who reads and writes them for his/her own work and/or for publication in scientific journals. It outlines the purpose and contents of each section of a research article and provides a checklist for reviewing and writing a research article. This article is intended for use by authors, reviewers, Extension workers, graduate students, and neophyte scientists when reviewing and writing a scholarly article. The reviewer has the responsibility to determine and demand quality, and by doing so quality will result.

Introduction

It is often difficult to distinguish between the various levels of scholarship found in periodical publications. This article presents a checklist (Figure 1) that can serve as a model for authors, reviewers, graduate students, Extension workers, and neophyte scientists when reviewing and writing a scholarly article such as that of Downing and Finley (2005).

First, it is important to define what is meant by the word "scholarly." Scholarly is defined as: 1) of or relating to scholars; 2) showing much knowledge and critical ability; and 3) devoted to learning (Coles Concise English Dictionary).

Figure 1.
A Checklist for Reviewing and Writing a Scholarly Article

Criterion	Excellent 5	Good 4	Fair 3	Poor 2	Failed 1
Is title consistent with content of article?					
Does abstract condense the article?					
Is the problem clearly stated?					
Are hypotheses clearly stated?					

Are all assumptions clearly stated? Are study limitations clearly stated?					
Are important terms clearly defined?					
Is introduction clear and relates problem to previous research?					
Is research method described clearly and fully?					
Is research method appropriate for problem solution?					
Are population and sample described fully?					
Is sampling method appropriate?					
Is there evidence of validity and reliability?					
Are data analysis procedures appropriate?					
Were statistical methods applied appropriate?					
Are results presented logically and clearly?					
Are conclusions clearly stated?					
Are conclusions consistent with evidence presented?					
Are generalizations confined to population from which the sample was taken?					
Is article clearly written?					
Is article logically organized?					
Is tone of article consistent with an unbiased, impartial scientific attitude?					
Did author cite mostly primary sources?					
Is article primary or secondary in nature?					
Are findings related to existing literature?					
Does article include recent and older literature?					
* Modified after Wandt in Issac & Michael (1971).					
**All items may not be appropriate for a given article.					

Scholarship

The Title

The title identifies the problem area and may specify the independent and dependent variables. Further, it may identify the target population and must be clear, descriptive, and short for indexing purposes. A title states the subject of a scholarly article instead of its conclusions.

The Abstract

The abstract may contain a statement of the research hypothesis, problem, and methodology. It clearly presents the main findings and conclusions. The abstract contains important information about the article and does not include citations. This section summarizes the whole article. *The Journal of Extension (JOE)* requires that the abstract should contain 100 or fewer words.

The Introduction

The introduction presents the research problem and objectives. It introduces the research by presenting background information related to the problem. It states clearly why the research is important, the research subject, and relates the problem to previous research via a brief and concise review of literature.

The Materials and Methods

This section includes a clear statement of the materials and procedures used to collect the study data. This portion of the article is a clear step-by-step set of statements of the data collection processes. Further, the author states clearly and concisely all assumptions. The author avoids including unnecessary details related to the research procedures. Here, the author states the independent, dependent, and classificatory variables of the data set.

The author is responsible for explaining the materials and methods as simply as possible. The author tries to strike a balance between providing too much information and too little. If the materials and methods are too complex or would make the article too long for the journal, the author provides references and/or an address where more complete instructions can be obtained (Tait, 1984).

If the procedures used are well known and without modifications, the author cites an article in which they are described. There are three important reasons for a clear description of the materials and methods used in a study: 1) to provide a recipe to replicate the study; 2) to provide evidence of the study's strength; and 3) to show that the procedures used are appropriate to solve the stated problem.

The Analysis of Data

This section presents clear and concise statements of how the data were analyzed. The analysis of data is an objective, instead of subjective or speculative, presentation (Isaac & Michael, 1971). It states all procedures and appropriate statistical methods used to analyze and/or summarize the study data.

The Results

The results section presents the statistics of the analyzed data and relegates interpretation to the discussion section. The author states whether differences exist between the treatments and to what degree. This section presents the research results in a logical sequence that supports or refutes the hypothesis and it may answer the question stated in the introduction.

The Discussion

Here, the author tries to interpret why the differences stated in the results section do or do not occur. Two to four salient points are interpreted in detail along with related literature citations. This section is based on the data that were actually collected and the resulting analysis of those data.

The author must be cognitive of a common error many researchers commit, i.e., use statistical inference analyses in a study and then ignore or water down the outcome in the discussion section (Tait, 1984). The reviewer and/or author should ask three important questions while reviewing and writing the discussion section of a scholarly article: 1) are conclusions based upon the data presented? 2) are the results discussed in an impartial and unbiased way? and 3) are the conclusions consistent with the results?

The Conclusions or Summary

This section presents a precise and accurate statement of the findings without introduction of new or irrelevant information. The conclusions drawn should be justified by the statistics and data presented. The author should use caution and make the necessary qualifications when drawing conclusions. This section poses new questions for possible investigation and, when appropriate, provides recommendation and implementation statements of the research findings.

References

Scholarly articles always cite their sources in the form of footnotes or bibliographies (in *JOE*, a References section). This section leads the reader to related work and to the work the author used to help formulate the article.

The Acknowledgements

This section gives credit for grant-in-aid and to persons who helped the author with data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of the results.

Conclusions

The review of a scholarly article is not just a matter of acceptance or rejection of the article. Instead, the article must be reviewed based upon a continuum (Tait, 1984) and/or a holistic approach. Reviewing a scholarly article is the responsibility the reviewer must accept and embrace. Presenting clearly organized, well-conceived, and well-communicated material to the audience is the responsibility the investigator or author must accept and embrace. The reviewer has the responsibility to determine and demand quality, and by doing so quality will result.

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