

How to Read and Critically Evaluate Psychological Information

Internet Sites

As you read any Internet site, always think about the following:

1. Authority: Who authored the information? What are his/her/their credentials? If the information is posted by an organization, what is the organization, and what is its credibility?
2. Accuracy: How reliable is the information? Where does it come from? Is it backed up with hard evidence? Are sources for the information provided?
3. Objectivity: Is the presentation well-balanced, or does it represent a particular bias?
4. Recency: Is the information current, up-to-date, based on the most recent findings?
5. Propaganda Techniques: Does the presentation make use of wording and phrasing designed to "trick" you into believing the information or point of view being expressed? Consider such techniques as:
 - Appeals to emotion: dramatic words such as "horrible," "terrible," "wonderful," "life-changing" etc.
 - Vague generalities and exaggerations: words such as "everyone," "nobody," "all the time," "never," etc.
 - Bandwagon references: phrases such as "Everybody knows..." or "It is common knowledge that..."
 - Vague testimonials: citing people of presumed but unsubstantiated or dubious expertise
 - Empty statements: statements that actually tell you nothing, the most common of which is "studies show..."

[And please note that when you write your Term Paper and Summary, you should make sure that you avoid using any of these techniques yourself!]

Research Studies

For full understanding, a research article should be read more than once. Begin by reading the Abstract carefully and then skim through the article itself. Read it a second and even a third time with the following questions in front of you.

1. Why was the study done? What research questions were being asked? Was some theory being tested? Was there a specific hypothesis that the researchers hoped to support? What was the connection between this study and existing theory and previous research?

2. Who were the subjects and how were they selected? Was the sample representative of the population to which the results are supposed to apply?
3. What were the variables in the study? How were they measured? Did the research employ established measures, or were new measures created for this study? If new measures were created, was any evidence given to demonstrate their reliability and validity?
4. If there was an experimental variable, how was it created? What sorts of groups were created and how did they differ to create an experimental variable? Was there any evidence to show that the experimental procedure was a valid way to create the experimental variable?
5. What sort of research design was employed? Was the design appropriate to the purpose of the study? Why was this design used rather than another?
6. What was the actual research procedure, step-by-step? As you read this part of the article, try to picture yourself as one of the subjects in order to visualize the exact sequence of events.
7. What were the results? How were they presented, and was that presentation clear?
8. What use was made of statistics? Were results analyzed to establish whether or not the results were statistically significant?
9. How was the problem of alternative explanations dealt with? Were there adequate controls to eliminate or control for other possible variables that were not a focus of the study but that might have potentially influenced or even explained the results?
10. What steps if any did the researchers take to control for subject and researcher bias?
11. What conclusions were drawn from the results? Did the conclusions follow logically from the data presented? Were the results consistent with whatever the researchers expected to find? Was their question answered? Was their hypothesis supported?
12. What inferences did the researchers draw from their study? How did they generalize their findings? How did they describe the meaning and importance of their findings to psychology?
13. What are potential applications of this study? Do the results and conclusions have any value to the practice of psychology and/or to everyday life?
14. Where do we go from here? Do the results of this study suggest or require some logical next step in further research?

15. Overall, how do you rate this study, and how much confidence do you have that it represents an important contribution to psychology?

Note that most of these questions ask for your critical assessment. Many of them will probably be addressed by the authors of the research article, but in a critical assessment, it is ultimately up to you to decide whether the answers given by the authors are acceptable. As you identify possible weaknesses or flaws in the study, it is quite possible that you will come up with at least some answers of your own that differ from those given by the authors.