

Library Research: Using *PsychLit*

For beginning as well as advanced students, the library is a principle site for psychology research, yet we typically lack training in library methods. In contrast it is standard in U. S. Law schools for students to start with 'legal research.'—learning to use the library to locate and brief court decisions. The following exercise in the library is intended to acquaint the psychology student with the primary research tools in the library, by having them locate and abstract (write a summary) of a journal article. This is done in three steps. First, reviewing the basic parts of a psychology journal article. Second, getting an overview of the resources in the library. And, third, finding an article and writing the abstract.

Basic parts of an article. The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (1994) prescribes a simple five-part format for scientific articles, which is standard for all psychology journals. Because we must know this format for our own reading and writing, let us learn it earlier rather than later. The material on page 4 provides a summary of these parts. An example of an abstract written by a reader, which you will do as part of this exercise is shown below. When articles closely follow the prescribed format, it is easier to write, and easier for the reader to understand, because they know where to look in the article when they do not understand something. Also included is a blank form to be used in completing this exercise.

Library Overview. When we enter the library with a specific question we want answered, perhaps because of an assignment or a term paper, we need to read books or journal articles. Before jumping into the stacks to look at journals, spend a few minutes getting an overview of the question. – what has been done and by whom. A convenient approach is to look into a psychology encyclopedia. In the library's reference room, check the shelf around BF 31/ E5, for two of the more recent encyclopedias – Corsini (1994) and Ramachandran (1994). In just a few minutes you can look up the question in the author and subject indices and scan the current state of knowledge.

Journal Index. Now, to find the journal articles for the most recent research on the topic, we must use the index *PsychLit*. This is a computer database of virtually everything, journal articles, books and book chapters, published each year related to psychology. For each source *PsychLit* provides the citation, where the item can be found, an abstract and other information. *PsychLit* is available on the terminals in the reference room, as well as from any computer on the Fordham network, such as in the dorm room. Get to the Fordham welcome page, click on library, click on databases, click on psychology, and finally, click on *PsychLit*.

Library Exercise

After your instructor reviews this information in lab, you will go as a group to the library Reference room and do this exercise. In the future you should be able to find articles using *PsychLit*. You will be divided into pairs and each pair will be given a sheet with the author and year of publication of an article. Each team is then to use *PsychLit* to find the full citation of the article and go to the stacks to find the original article or if it is on the internet, download it. Then each person in the team writes the question the article addresses and an abstract of that article. The question and abstracts are written individually not as a team. Your abstract should be one or two sentences for each of the 4 sections of an article. See attachment B for an example of a completed assignment.

References

- American Psychological Association (1994). *Publication Manual* (4th ed.) Washington, DC: Author.
Corsini, R.J. (1994). (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (2nd ed.). NY: Wiley.
Ramachandran, V.S. (1994). (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*. San Diego CA: Academic.

Sample PsychLit Assignment

Name John Smith Date 9/13/1999

Psychology Journal Library Research
Author (year) Bickman (1975)

Question

Are shoppers in a department store more likely to report a shoplifter if the store posts signs asking them to tell the manager when they see a theft?

1. Citation, including Author(s), year, title, journal, volume and pages.

Bickman, L. (1975). Bystander intervention in crime: The effect of a mass-media campaign. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 5, 296-302.

2. Problem:

Very few people seem to report a thief stealing items in a store. What would happen if a store posted signs to encourage citizens to report a thief they see stealing goods?

3. Methods:

The University of Massachusetts bookshop posted and distributed information to students on how and why they should report shoplifters. Then the experimenter staged 184 thefts to see how student shoppers would react.

4. Results:

Only 2% of students reported the theft before signs, compared with 9% afterwards, so posters related to a small but clear increase in intervention.

5. Discussion:

Later interviews found shoppers are not mentally prepared to confront or report a thief, even when the store informs them how to do so. The store cannot rely on shoppers as a way to detect thieves.

Psychology Journal Library Research

Name _____ Section _____

Author (year) _____

Questions:

1. Citation, including Author(s), year, title, journal, volume and pages.
2. Problem:
3. Methods:
4. Results:
5. Discussion:

Written Scientific Articles

Presenting empirical research is simpler, more precise, and clearer when the APA format is closely followed. While the complete style guide may seem daunting at first the following are the major sections found in a research paper. Complete information is to be found in the APA manual or at several web sites (see References below). The entire scientific method can be seen as a simple problem leading to a simple solution, with a careful filtering system in between to insure the solution accuracy. This format makes it easier for the investigator to write the paper, easier for the reader to read and understand it, and more rigorous in content.

Introduction, which has no heading, states the problem or question being asked by the reported research, and the importance of the question. The problem is always in (a) question format, (b) relating two variables, and (c) empirically answerable. The hypothesis is a tentative answer to the question, which the scientist offers as an educated guess for conducting the empirical research. This section also defines, for the reader, all terms in the problem and summarizes previous literature related to the problem. For example, "Children raised with strict discipline grow into better adults" is not answerable because 'better' is a subjective term. "Children raised with strict discipline will commit fewer crimes as an adult" is answerable. In general, moralistic terms like better/worse, good/bad, should/shouldn't, have no place in the problem or hypothesis, because they have no meaning part from the opinion of the person using the term.

Method describes how the problem was answered, that is, how the hypothesis was tested, in enough detail for a reader to repeat (replicate) the study by reading this section. The methods section is usually divided into three subsections, (a) Subjects which describes the important characteristics of the participants in the study, including their number, sex, source of sample, etc. (b) Materials, which describes any apparatus or questionnaires used. (c) Procedure, which describes how each variable was measured, the nature of the comparison group or condition, etc.

Results are the data obtained by the investigator. This typically involves descriptive statistics in either tables or graphs (called figures), and any inferential statistics conducted to help the investigator determine whether the relationship found was produced by chance.

Discussion is where the investigator presents their personal thoughts about the results, what they mean, their limitations, alternative explanations of the results, unexpected findings and suggestions for future research.

Abstract, which appears at the beginning of the article but is written last, summarizes the above 4 sections of the paper. The reader should be able to read the abstract and get a basic feel for the question, how it was answered, the result, and the interpretation of the result.

References begin on a new page, alphabetized by author of articles, books and book chapters specifically referred to in the article.

References

American Psychological Association (1994). *Publication Manual* (4th ed.) Washington, DC: Author.

Web sources of information on APA style:

<http://www.ldl.net/~bill/apatwo.htm>

http://webster.commnet.edu/apa/apa_index.htm

<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~instruct/guides/apa.html>

General information on writing:

<http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>