

Identifying Primary Research Articles

What Are Primary Research Articles?

Primary, or original, research articles document an original project carried out by a researcher or scientist. In technology fields, a researcher will sometimes perform a test or experiment on a technology or piece of equipment. Results from the study or test are frequently released in a primary research article.

Is it Primary Research?

Primary articles include a:

- review of the most important literature in the field that relates to their topic
- detailed explanation of the experiment or study
- description of the findings or results of the study or experiment
- complete bibliography

Primary research should explain exactly what the researcher did in the study or experiment. You should be able to use this explanation to duplicate the experiment if you wanted to.

Primary research articles are almost always written by the researchers or scientists themselves. These articles should describe what the authors have done personally, not describe the work others have done. If an article summarizes the work done by others, it is not primary research.

Reading Article Abstracts

You can frequently tell if an article is a primary research article by simply reading the abstract. This method does not work every time. Sometimes you will have to get the full-text of a journal article before you decide if it is primary research. However, a quick look at the abstract can help you save time and search more effectively. Look for simple clues in an article abstract and ask yourself:

- Does the abstract clearly describe a research project or study?
- Does the abstract talk about methods used to carry out research?
- Does the abstract discuss findings or results?
- What language is used in the abstract?

Language in Article Abstracts

Since primary research articles are written by the researchers themselves, the articles often (but not always) use the first person. Look at the language used in the abstract. Do you see phrases such as "our research" or "we conducted an experiment?" If so, you are probably looking at a primary research article. Remember, authors do not always use the first person to discuss their research, thus, you will also see phrases like "these findings." On the other hand, if you see phrases such as "this article describes" or "we summarize," you are probably looking at a secondary article or literature review.