

# Understanding Empirical Research:

Breaking Down an Empirical Research Article

# The Basic Components of an Empirical Research Article

- Introduction and Literature Review
  - The introduction, as implied by the name, is used to introduce the area of research, and “set the stage” for what is to come.
  - Within this section, the author/authors provide justification for why the study is important, what it will add to the extant literature, and state the proposed research question or hypothesis. Of course there may (and often will be) multiple research questions or hypothesis put forth.
  - Any relevant theory, that helps to explain the research question or hypothesis, will also be incorporated into this section.

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- Introduction and Literature Review (continued)
  - The literature review, which is often combined with the introduction, offers a literal review of the extant literature on the area of research. Only the most useful and informative theories and studies will be included.
  - Literature reviews vary in length and depth; however, most will be fairly thorough. Within this section, the author/authors will point out evidence which supports the proposed hypothesis, and illustrate what the existing studies lack. The latter serves to truly justify why the “present study” was important to conduct.

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- Methods (or Methodology)
  - The methods section acts as the “recipe” for a study, in that it spells out all of the details regarding how the study was conducted.
  - Generally, this section will be comprised of three main components: (1) the sample, (2) measures (i.e., what variables were included in the study, and how they were measured), and (3) procedures (all of the steps taken to actually conduct the study).
  - The methods section will also likely contain information about the study design.

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- Results

- The results section provides detail regarding the outcomes of all the analyses that were run.
- Most results sections will begin with what are termed either descriptive or summary statistics, which serves to describe various attributes about the sample.
- The primary analyses will focus on testing the hypothesis (or hypotheses), and/or will seek to answer any proposed research questions.
- Often many secondary, or post-hoc, analyses will be run as well. Researchers hate to waste available data!

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- Discussion
  - The final section of an empirical research article tends to be labeled as the discussion, although sometimes it is labeled as conclusions.
  - The discussion section serves as a summary of the study. Within this section, the proposed research questions, and/or hypotheses will be revisited. The major findings related to those questions and/or hypotheses will be discussed.
  - This section will often contain information about the limitations of the study.

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- Discussion (continued)
  - The limitations of the study refer to anything that hampered the process of conducting the study, or compromised the strength or validity of the findings.
  - For example, if the researchers were unable to adhere to their procedural plans for some reason, and were forced to make a change in the middle of their study, that would qualify as a limitation.
  - A small sample size would also be a limitation, as the findings would only apply to small number of people.
  - Limited generalizability would also serve as a limitation.

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- Policy Implications
  - Sometimes a separate policy implications section will be provided, or the information may simply be incorporated into the discussion section.
  - Policy implications refers to the impact of the study findings in relation to existing policies. The findings may validate a policy, illustrate the need for policy amendments, or call for the abolition of a policy altogether.
  - Policies exist in every realm of the criminal justice system; however, few are ever the result of scholarly research. After the fact evaluations of these policies, dissemination of study findings, and utilization of valid assessments are of great importance.