

Reading Spirituality & Health Research Articles: A Practical Guide for Clinical Pastoral Education Students

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The following is a strategy to help CPE students efficiently gain a basic, critical understanding of a research article and its potential relevance, especially if they are new to the literature and unfamiliar with the typical reporting format.

- 1) Read the Abstract thoroughly.
 - 2) Who produced this work? (—What are the authors’ credentials and/or professional affiliations?)
 - 3) How old is the research? When was data collected? (—This may or may not be well represented by the publication date.) If this is not apparent in the Abstract, keep the question in mind. If the data is many years old, or if it was collected during some period of a sudden change of circumstances (like the COVID-19 pandemic), then that might affect generalizability to the present day.
 - 4) Read the Introductory section carefully, looking particularly for:
 - what's motivating the authors (What is triggering their enthusiasm?) and the thinking behind their work
 - key concepts involved in the study (Are they defined and clear?)
 - a review of what is already known about the subject
 - the authors' explicitly stated purpose, goals, and hypotheses (sometimes only at the end of the section).
 - 5) Look at the Methodology section to see how the researchers tried to collect relevant data. Try to understand if the methodology is qualitative, quantitative, or mixed, and what kind of sample was used (—especially how large was the sample and how it was selected). However, if you feel you're getting bogged down in technical material you don't understand, simply skip to the next section (for now).
 - 6) The Results section may or may not be easily readable. If not, move on to the Discussion section. You can always come back to the Results section later, to dig into the specifics of the data, including any tables that supplement the text.
 - 7) Read the Discussion section *with care*, watching for:
 - summary statements (often at the beginning of the section or paragraphs) and a conclusion (at the end)
 - words touting the special value of the study (like “first,” “strong,” “surprising,” or “differs from”)
 - authors’ speculations about the results (—often insightful, but distinct from the results themselves)
 - acknowledgement of limitations of the study (which may be paired with suggestions for future study)
 - comments about clinical implications
- [Note: Many articles have separate sections for Clinical Implications, Limitations & Future Research, and a Conclusion; but some combine several of these into a general Discussion.]
- 8) What precisely are the authors' claims coming out of the research and the generalizability of the findings?
 - 9) What does the article make you think about? What does it make you want to know more about? How might it expand your thinking regarding your own chaplaincy practice? (Consider not only the results of a study but the *questions* and *ideas* that ground the research or are generated by it.)

If the article is a *REVIEW* of research rather than a report of an original study, then it may be efficient to move directly from the Abstract to the Discussion section (and any Conclusion paragraph), and then go back into the paper to fill in the details. Reviews can be quite useful just in their identification of key studies.