How to Read an Article in the Humanities
S. Schuler
2014

Articles in the humanities are essays: they attempt to prove a point through logical arguments and analysis of evidence. As essays, they may go off on tangents or subtly imply what they hesitate to state outright. They are written by professional scholars for other professional scholars. Ideally, they are written to be accessible to non-specialists as well, but in reality, many articles are full of fancy words and long sentences that do more to conceal meaning than reveal it. Nevertheless, assume that the author writes in good faith, and that she or he is trying to help you understand the topic better.

Unlike articles in the sciences, articles in the humanities do not follow a standard template, nor do they usually have abstracts that summarize their main points. There is, however, a set of traditional practices that most authors will follow.

First, an article may take up as much as 20% of its space with introductory material before it gets to its thesis. If that seems odd to you, consider that the introduction to a 5-paragraph essay also takes up approximately 20% of the paper. The author may hint at the thesis in the first one or two paragraphs, or even in the title, but do not expect it.

Before stating the thesis, an article must first justify its own existence, which it does in two ways. First, it must pose a problem, question, or quandary that it will attempt to solve. In articles on literature, it is usually a question of interpretation: how should readers best understand the text before them? Second, it must show that it has something new to say about the topic in question, so it must list and summarize the work of other scholars, explaining how these works are flawed or incomplete. (Such summaries are sometimes relegated to footnotes or endnotes.) Then it will proceed to state a thesis of its own.

Do not assume that the article’s thesis will appear in a single sentence. More often, it is stated in a series of sentences, and sometimes in a whole paragraph. Some authors will be so helpful as to introduce the thesis with phrases like, “I argue that…” or “I propose to prove that…,” but most do not. Most articles instead set out to prove a set of claims that build on each other.

Once the article has explained what it is setting out to prove, it will offer supporting evidence and detailed analysis. (In articles on literature, this always includes analysis of text.) Pay special attention to any sub-headings, which should direct you to the main points of the article. The article may also offer historical information, cultural background, or theoretical vocabulary in order to prove its point. Take special note of terms that the author uses frequently—look them up to be sure you know what the author means. If you are already very familiar with the text in question, you may want to skim the detailed analysis.

Pay close attention to the last few paragraphs of an article, but do not expect a tidy summary of the article’s thesis and main points. Instead, expect the author to explain the significance of his or her argument. A good conclusion will tell where the argument ultimately leads. Be sure to read any footnotes and/or endnotes, in which authors will often qualify their arguments, make interesting observations, or point you to helpful sources. Also, do not neglect to skim the article’s sources—its bibliography or footnotes—which will point you to additional sources for your own research.