

ANATOMY OF A RESEARCH ARTICLE

Joseph E. Muscolino D.C.

Introduction

As massage therapy enters its place among the professions of complimentary alternative medicine (CAM), the need for research becomes clear. We may know many wonderful things that massage therapy can do for our clients, but others do not, and our word is not always enough. Conducting research studies shows to the world that the beneficial effects of massage therapy are many and are reproducible. Reproducibility means that it doesn't just work for our clients; it will also work for their clients. For this reason, the massage world is stepping to the plate and an increasing amount of research is being done. The Massage Therapy School Research Consortium is a consortium of schools that are pledged to conducting research in the field of massage. The Massage Therapy Foundation is an organization that supports this research by awarding grants.

The first step toward research literacy is having a familiarity and comfort level with reading and critically thinking through research articles. Yet, for those of us who are not familiar with reading and making sense of these articles ourselves, it may be a daunting task when asked to read the first few articles. The good news is that most every research article is organized in a similar manner and if we are familiar with its structure, it is easier to read, understand, and navigate the article. To facilitate the process of becoming familiar with the structure of a research article, I have broken down the 'typical research article' into its basic elements. The main purposes of each section, as well as the definitions of some of the key terms that tend to appear in a research article are also stated.

Anatomy of a Research Article

A research article is usually arranged into 6 sections with the following headers:

1. Abstract
2. Introduction
3. Methods
4. Results
5. Discussion
6. References

Sometimes, the header for one or some of these sections is slightly different. For example, 'methods' might be called 'material and methods' or 'methodology;' or 'results' might be called 'findings.' When present, these alternate names are usually close enough to the above names that the reader will not be confused.

Purpose of Each Section

1. **Abstract:** The main purpose of the abstract is to summarize the entire research article. The value of the abstract is that when you are doing a literature search and trying to find all articles dealing with a particular topic, reading the abstract can help you decide if that particular article will be useful to you. In other words, the abstract can potentially save you from reading the entire paper only to find out that the article does not address the topic you are investigating.
2. **Introduction:** The introduction is just that; it introduces you to the topic of the research study of the article. Often the introduction lays out the history of the research studies done in the past for this particular topic, stating what was found in them. It then continues to explain why this particular study is valuable or needed. It will usually also state what the specific objective of this research study is.
3. **Methods:** the methods section explains the nuts and bolts of how the research study was conducted. It states how many participants were in the various groups, how they were chosen, what the exact procedure was for the treatment group and the control group, etc. One can look at the methods section as being like a recipe that was followed.
4. **Results:** As the name implies, the results section states the results of the study. This section refrains from drawing any subjective conclusions as to the meaning of the results; it merely objectively states what the findings were.
5. **Discussion:** The discussion section now discusses the results that were stated in the results section. This is where the meaning of the results is interpreted and conclusions are drawn. This section will hopefully also state whatever limitations the study was found to have. It will usually also state what the implications of the findings of the research study are; i.e. what the implications might be for the massage therapist practicing massage (if the research study involved massage), as well as what the implications are for future research studies involving this topic.

To have access to the complete article, subscribe to Digital COMT.

CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE!