

Evaluating the Research Literature in Psychology

The Assignment:

For this assignment you need to find a popular article on the internet which reports on a psychological phenomenon. The popular article can be on any topic we are studying this semester and can come from a wide variety of internet sites, such as on-line magazines or newspapers or any non-scientific web site. Your task is to locate the scientific literature relevant to the popular source's claim(s) and use the literature to evaluate the claims.

Goals:

In the process of researching and writing the assigned paper and learning about information resources from the tutorial and instruction session, you should enhance your skills in: a) critically evaluating popular and scholarly sources of information in terms of their content and methods, b) understanding the various types of information resources and how to use them appropriately, c) effectively using databases and online catalogs to find resources at Kenyon and other libraries, d) synthesizing information from various sources and using it appropriately in a research paper format, and e) finding and using APA format for reference citations.

Resources and Requirements:

1. **Information Literacy Tutorial.** During the first semester, you may have been required to complete the information literacy tutorial at this web address: <http://www.denison.edu/ohio5/infolit>. If you have already gone through it, you are not required to do so again, though you may want to refer back to it to refresh your memory. If you have never completed the tutorial, you are strongly encouraged to do so.
2. **The Psychology Liaison.** The psychology liaison in the library is Joe Murphy. While all of the librarians can assist you with basic questions (e.g., how do I use the PsycINFO database, where do I find the psychology journals), you may want to contact Joe if you have more specific questions regarding psychology resources.
3. **Research Paper.** The text of your paper must be no more than **1 page** in length (including references), single spaced with no less than 1/2-inch margins and a 10-point font size. I will not accept more than 1 page, so work on writing concisely. This is actually more difficult than writing a longer paper, but it's an excellent skill to develop. You should have at least 4 sources (**at least one popular source, and 3 primary sources**), fully cited at the end of the paper. Use the APA (American Psychological Association) style of writing for your references. There are copies of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association in the psychology department reading room, as well as in the library reference desk.

Deadline: See [syllabus](#). Late papers will not be accepted.

Grading Information: This assignment is worth 30 points, with the following breakdown.

5	Summary of popular finding
12	Scholarly Evidence
5	Evaluation of Evidence
5	Suggestions for future Research
3	References

Organize your paper as shown below, using the headings given. You will be evaluated based on how well you address the requirements in each section.

Popular Claim. Briefly state the finding which was reported in a popular source. Explain why this finding might be interesting or useful, and then state what your initial reaction was to the finding (in terms of its veracity). Were you skeptical? Did you think the claim might be overstated? Did you wonder whether there were boundary conditions, or only certain contexts or populations in which the claim was true? Did you think that the finding was interesting, but that the explanation (or theory) behind it was unlikely to be correct?

Scholarly Evidence. Discuss the evidence you reviewed. It would be best to start with a description of the original study that was reported in the popular source, if you can find it. You'll want to know whether the popular source misrepresented the original finding. As you report on each study, briefly describe the research methods and the data, NOT just the conclusions that the author/s drew from the study. Use the conventions demonstrated below for citing articles.

Example: ...Some researchers have tried to determine whether other stimuli besides Mozart music can cause the Mozart Effect. Nantais and Schellenberg (1999) asked participants to listen to either Mozart music, Schubert music, or to sit in silence for ten minutes. After each treatment they were asked to perform a paper-folding and cutting task, which is a standardized measure of spatial reasoning skills that is used on some IQ tests. Spatial reasoning scores were higher in both the Schubert and Mozart music conditions as opposed to the silence condition, showing that the "Mozart Effect" is caused by music other than that written by Mozart...

Evaluation and Summary of Evidence. In this section you should synthesize and integrate the evidence from the various sources you read, and summarize the state of the evidence. In particular, you need to say how well the evidence either confirms or disconfirms the claims of the popular source. If the state of the evidence is unclear or conflicting at this point, you need to note that as well.

Example: ...Overall, the website seemed to overstate the amount of scientific evidence which supports the Mozart effect, and did not mention any of the published non-replications. Several investigators (e.g., Steele, Bass, and Crook, 1999) have had trouble getting a Mozart Effect, even when following the procedures used by Raucher, Shaw, and Ky (1993;1995) in their original studies...

...Some investigators have speculated that when the effect does occur, it is really a result of mood or arousal changes caused by a pleasurable experience like listening to music (Nantais and Schellenberg, 1999), as opposed to Mozart music having a special effect on cognition. Given that other music besides Mozart music, and even other non-musical stimuli such as short stories have been shown to cause the effect, the arousal/mood explanation seems plausible...

Suggestions for Future Research. Suggest a few directions for future researchers, based on your evaluation of the literature you read.

Example: Future work should explore whether physiological arousal or mood actually changes when people are exposed to music or other preferred stimuli. It may be that arousal or mood changes lead to better functioning of attention, which could lead to better cognitive performance in general. If this is true, one would then expect that many other cognitive abilities besides spatial reasoning should be affected by Mozart music, and so future research should test the effects of music (or other pleasing stimuli) on other cognitive processes such as reading, perceiving, and remembering. In any case, I would suggest that future research should avoid using the misleading term "Mozart Effect", because the evidence clearly shows that other manipulations (e.g., music by other composers, or pleasing stories) can cause the same elevation in test scores.

References. List the references in alphabetical order. Only cite the references you actually read and used in the text of your paper. If you must refer to a study that you did not actually read, see the APA style manual for the citation format. However, be aware that you should avoid using secondary reports of primary research. The secondary source may have misinterpreted or incorrectly cited the original article.