

# How to organize a virtual journal club

## (How to do X in linguistics 4)

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Over the past year, the doctoral students of our department have been organizing a weekly journal club. For me as a linguist, the discussions of various research articles opened up a whole new perspective on science in general and linguistics in particular. I learned about the interests and viewpoints of my fellow doctoral students and other researchers in our department working on historical linguistics, language documentation, and cultural evolution. In addition, organizing a journal club also helped me learn how to spark and lead a discussion. I hope the following personal insights offer some ideas and guidelines on how you can organize a journal club of your own.

### What is a journal club?

A group of people interested in discussing research articles can form a journal club. Typically, the group meets on a regular basis and chooses a different research article each week. The selection of articles can be based on either a specific topic or free choice. In our department, the journal club is a space in which we evaluate and talk about research articles from a range of different disciplines. Due to the interdisciplinary alignment of our department, we discuss articles from linguistics, animal cognition, psychology, anthropology, among others.

The challenge is to establish a common ground on which an article can be discussed by scholars from different scientific disciplines. Compared to textbooks, research articles often assume a lot of prior knowledge about theory and/or methods and they do not represent a neatly organized summary of the basics. However, the advantage of reading a research article is that the group can discuss how it applies to their own work and it allows a view beyond one's own nose. Even if your group consists of only linguists,

they are likely to have different foci in their research. For example, I have a MA degree in linguistics with a focus on psycholinguistics and typology, so that an article on the historical spread of Celtic languages is still a foreign topic to me. Depending on the members of your journal club, you can decide how closely the articles should relate to a particular topic. Some insights into how we select articles for an interdisciplinary department are discussed in the next section.

## **Article selection**

In our case, we have a weekly rotation of journal club coordinators. Our group consists of 13 organizers (mostly doctoral students). As a journal club coordinator, you are in charge of selecting an article for a specific week. Some find this task quite challenging because they try to find an article that is interesting for the entire department. In my experience, it is not necessary to choose a more general article to have an interesting discussion. Since we are an interdisciplinary department, we have many specialists who have particular research interests. I would encourage everyone to select an article that is interesting to you. Each discussion is different in that it is either nitty-gritty with a small group of experts or a big picture discussion with lots of participants. The number of participants of a journal club session is not a measure of success!

To ensure that we have articles that are of interest to other department members, we created an article recommendation spreadsheet. Over the course of a few weeks, I reached out to individual department members and asked them to send me 1-2 article recommendations. Most of them wanted to present an article by themselves, others send me a list of articles that they would like to see discussed at some point. (This process should be repeated from time to time to get new recommendations and encourage others to present an article in your journal club.) Of course, each journal club coordinator can choose whether to present an article from the recommendation's list or of their own choice.

For the article selection, it is also essential to decide whether or not your group would like to discuss articles written by members of the department. In the event that you want to talk about a colleague's article, ask them beforehand if they are okay with it. You should also make sure that the article selection includes research from people of diverse backgrounds and genders.

The goal of a journal club is to extend your knowledge so I would recommend choosing an article outside of your research area (e.g., linguistics) once in a while. *Language* can be studied from various angles and it is useful to keep an open mind when

selecting an article. It can be tricky to talk about an article with a topic or method that is unfamiliar to members of your group, but those discussions usually open up new perspectives and ideas.

## **A typical journal club session**

In March 2020, the world went upside down and we suddenly had to cancel all our in-person journal club meetings. Without hesitations and with the support of our coordinators, we quickly established a virtual journal club via Zoom. I was able to get a Zoom license from our IT department so that I could host our weekly Zoom meetings. Our online meetings usually proceed as follows:

At the beginning of each meeting, I make sure that everyone is connected and admitted to the Zoom meeting. As soon as all participants are connected with the audio, I welcome everyone and handover the floor to the journal club coordinator of the week. The coordinator summarizes the main points of the article in about 5-8 minutes. Thereafter, everyone is invited to express their comments and ask questions.

As the coordinator, it comes in handy if you have specific questions prepared in case the participants are shy and nobody wants to go first. It is important that you lead the discussion in that you call on people who raised their hand or unmuted themselves. Especially in an online setting, one person needs to act as a moderator to keep the conversation flowing. Nobody expects that you know the details of the data analysis or the like. However, you should be prepared to comment on the points that have been raised or organically transition to a new focus in the discussion. Our journal club sessions last for one hour.

In the end, the coordinator summarizes the key points of the discussion and thanks everyone for attending. As the Zoom meeting host, I close the session by announcing the coordinator for next week's journal club. After the meeting, the journal club coordinator creates a summary of the discussions as well as the links mentioned in the chat and shares them with the department.

## **Useful Zoom settings**

Depending on your (or your institution's) preferences, you can choose any video platform for your journal club. I would recommend using a platform that is intended for video chats with multiple attendees. A platform that mainly supports webinars is not sufficient.

Although it is not necessary that everyone has turned on their camera, all participants should be able to unmute themselves and write messages to everyone in the chat.

Some useful Zoom settings are:

- create a recurring meeting with your [personal meeting ID](#)
- enable a [waiting room](#) (this allows you to open the Zoom meeting a few minutes earlier so that participants have the feeling that they are “logged in”)
- [mute all participants](#) when they enter the room (this prevents unwanted background noises because often people do not realize that their mic is on when they enter a virtual room)
- automatically [save chat](#)

For most of the settings, you have to visit the Zoom web portal where you will find more options to adjust your Zoom meeting settings.

## Organization tips

The following tips are meant to help you structure the organization of a journal club as the main coordinator. For our journal club, I created a cloud folder where we add material that allows us to run a smoothly organized journal club each week.

1. A list for the journal club coordinators (columns: DATE | COORDINATOR | REPLACEMENT | PAPER)
2. A list with article recommendations (columns: TITLE | RECOMMENDED BY | DOI | COMMENT)
3. A diary document with summaries of previous discussions
4. Some additional documents (e.g., guidelines, checklists, email templates)

As the main coordinator, you are responsible for updating the documents. Luckily, my fellow coordinators often support me in adding their summaries to the journal club diary or organize a replacement when they are not able to present an article on their assigned spot. In addition, a fellow doctoral student created a how-to presentation with tips and tricks for a successful journal club session. The additional documents (e.g., how-to, templates) are especially useful for newcomers or senior scientists who want to present an article.

We have a recurring loop over the steady journal coordinators so that everyone has to present an article approximately every 13 weeks. The time interval is extended when another member of our department agrees to present an article. In this case, I arrange a

date with them and add them to the list. For each month, I send out little reminders of who is going to be a coordinator in the upcoming weeks (an additional reminder in the week before is sometimes also helpful). Members who have not presented an article in the journal club before receive an email with all the necessary information.

## Reminders

To inform the entire department which article will be discussed in the upcoming journal club, the coordinator for the week sends out two emails. The first email includes an announcement with the reference, a short summary, or the abstract of the article. This email is sent one week before the journal club. The second email is a reminder and is sent to everyone a day before the journal club. In addition, the time and date of the journal club, as well as the Zoom link, is mentioned in each email. If your institution uses platforms like Slack, you could also [create automatic reminders](#).

## Making your journal club worthwhile

The most important thing you need to make your journal club a fruitful experience for everyone is a great team! I found it truly rewarding to set up a well-organized virtual journal club with my fellow doctoral students. Especially in these uncertain times, the journal club is an anchor and a place where we can connect with each other. Although the discussions can sometimes be challenging because you do not understand the details of a statistical analysis, it has inspired me to learn more about research outside of my own bubble. Of course, a journal club is meaningless without its participants and I enjoy the joint discussion between junior and senior scientists. That is why I would like to stress one crucial point: A worthwhile journal club lives from a healthy discussion culture. This includes not getting lost in details, expressing criticism as well as appreciation, and trying to keep an eye on the bigger picture.