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Scholarly Reading Guide: Strategies for Reading and Comprehending Scholarly Texts

created by

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What are our Scholarly Reading Guide resources?

Our Scholarly Reading Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners at Vanderbilt University the opportunity to better read and comprehend scholarly texts. *Strategies for Reading and Comprehending Scholarly Texts* provides learners with strategies for reading scholarly texts critically.

Scholarly Reading

Academia requires a great deal of reading. Many careers involve extensive reading as well. Lawyers read cases. Doctors read medical journals for the latest research in their field. Educators read to stay informed on learning theories and classroom techniques. Simply staying informed on what is happening in your discipline requires frequent reading.

Reading Critically & Critical Thinking

In general, scholarly articles are short arguments. Most articles make or suggest an argument. Therefore, we read articles to figure out what the author is arguing or suggesting. Is the author suggesting a new type of research, arguing for a new way of doing something, or presenting the audience with new data? In short, figuring out the primary purpose of the article is vital.

However, scholarly reading does not stop there. Reading an article is not just about reading the article. You must also ‘get to know’ the article. Part of getting to know an article involves understanding why an article was published and why it matters to your field. This means understanding the methodology the article used, the seminal sources the article relied on, and the terms the article is using for the argument. That might seem like much to understand at first. Practicing scholarly reading generally helps readers get faster at reading articles for content, methods, findings, and sources.

Scholarly Reading in your Discipline¹

Being part of a discipline means keeping up-to-date with the latest publications, research methods, cases, and theories in your field. Knowing which journals your field values is important. Finding the primary journals and seminal research in your field will help your interactions with faculty, dissertation committees, and fellow researchers. In essence, that is what it means to ‘know your field’. Being able to read an article and understand it matters. However, understanding why an article was published and why an article matters in your discipline is vital too. In essence, there is extensive information to keep track of in scholarly reading. Research papers and journal articles are the most common type of scholarly reading as they are the means by which scholars learn information and the new contributions made by researchers and authors in their specific fields.

Reading Your Discipline with a Reading Plan²

Having a reading plan or using reading strategies can help you read the articles in your discipline. While each discipline varies slightly, you can use this type of chart for quick reference if looking for specific information or to see how each piece connects to other pieces in articles:

¹ *Writing for Academic Disciplines* by Sarah Hayward, 2015, Oxford University Press

² Adapted from *How to Read (and Understand) a Social Science Journal Article* by Laubepin, 2013, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, p. 2

Table 1: Reading Strategy

| Look for... | Title | Abstract | Introduction | Literature review | Methods & data | Results | Discussion & Conclusion | References |
|--------------------------------|-------|----------|--------------|-------------------|----------------|---------|-------------------------|------------|
| The big picture | ■ | ■ | | | | | | |
| More detail | | | ■ | | | | ■ | |
| Main points | | ■ | | | | | ■ | |
| New claims | | ■ | | | | | ■ | |
| Data analyses | | | | | ■ | | | |
| Graphs & Tables | | | | | | ■ | | |
| Theory | | ■ | | ■ | | | ■ | |
| Implications | | | | | | | ■ | |
| Publications on this topic | | | | ■ | | | | ■ |
| What is known about this topic | | | ■ | ■ | | | | |

For a more detailed explanation of the chart above or for more tips, see our [Introduction to Scholarly Reading](#) resource.

Three-Pass Method³

Another strategy is called the three-pass method. The three-pass method suggests reading articles in three ‘passes’. A pass means you move through the text, and each reading ‘pass’ looks for different things in the article.

Using the three-pass method can help you avoid feeling overwhelmed by the information in the article which allows you to take in information in small doses.

Passes:

- The *first pass* gives you a general idea about the paper.
- The *second pass* lets you grasp the paper’s content, but not the details.
- The *third pass* helps you understand the paper in depth.

³ Adapted from *How to Read a Computer Paper* by Keshav, 2007, ACM SIGCOMM Computer Communication Review 37(3), pp. 83–84

First pass

The first pass is a quick scan to get an overview of the paper. This pass takes about five to ten minutes and consists of the following steps:

- Carefully read the title and abstract; skim the introduction.
- Read the section headings (just the titles of the sections).
- Skim the conclusion.
- Glance at the references looking for authors you recognize.

Second pass

The second pass helps you understand the key points. You should:

- Look carefully at the figures and tables.
- Mark the references that you have not read (this is a good way to measure how much background knowledge you have about the topic).

At this point, you can decide if this article is unrelated to your research or a must-read. You can now choose to set aside the paper, make a note to read the paper later in your career, or return to the paper and do the third pass.

Third pass

The third pass attempts to understand the authors' arguments and how they got to their conclusions. This step takes several hours for beginners but much less time for experienced academic readers. During this step you should:

- Spend more time with each section of the article (especially if this topic is related to your research/discipline).
- Look up the references on the bibliography list. Notice how many times the references have been cited by other people and pay attention to articles that seem to be cited by multiple writers.

After the third pass, you should understand the following:

- What the author is arguing or proving
- What type of evidence the author provided
- How the author has selected and used references on the bibliography page
- What the paper contributes to the field

Reading the 'Larger Body of Research'

Scholarly reading requires you to understand the types of articles within your discipline. Research articles have basic features: *something that was studied and something that was discovered*.

Scholarly reading requires you to understand what was studied, why it was studied, and how the author's discovery fits into your discipline's 'larger body of research', which means articles often build on prior studies or use prior theories to make specific claims. When reading articles, ask yourself:

- Is the article discovering or concluding something?
- Is the author mentioning several past studies arguing for a new theory, approach, or framework for your discipline?

Much research is in response to the research done already or following the research methods scholars find acceptable. For example, researchers do not usually decide to conduct research in whatever manner they want. Researchers rely on **what** has been done in the past and **how** it was done. This means that most journal articles do one or all of the following:

- Mention prior studies or published work
- Discuss certain theories (these might not be studies or articles; these might be philosophers or ideas)
- Rely on specific methods for conducting research

Reading Strategies for Understanding your Discipline

Improving your ability to read three specific sections of journal articles can help you understand what research has been done in your field and how it was done. This information is mentioned throughout articles but discussed fully in three places: literature review, methodology, and discussion/findings. Look at each section separately for ways to read these sections to find out what research has been done in your field and how it was done.

Revisiting the Article⁴

Research shows that revisiting the material you have read can help you retain the information longer.⁵ Asking yourself questions after you read an article can help you revisit the article's material and reduce the amount of times you have to re-read.

After reading the Introduction, ask yourself:

- What is the purpose of the article?
- What is the article trying to suggest/argue for?

After reading the Methods, ask yourself:

- What did the author do? Interview people? Conduct an experiment? Examine a certain moment in history?

After reading the Results, ask yourself:

- What is the major finding—what the author(s) figured out?
- Did the author have enough data to prove what they are suggesting/arguing?

After reading the Discussion, ask yourself:

- Do you agree with the conclusions drawn from the data?
- What further research could be done to either replicate the research or prove the research is not accurate?

Overall questions to ask yourself:

- Does the author talk about other research in the discipline/field? What research does the author discuss the most? Why?
- Does the author indicate future research questions? What type of research should be conducted?
- Does the author suggest something new? A new way of doing a certain type of research? A new term/phrase/theory/approach?

⁴ Adapted from *Tools for Reading in Graduate School*, 2013, Queen's University, Kingston, ON

⁵ *Making it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* by Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press

Reading Structure of Scholarly Research

Structure in Scholarly Research

While the structure of research papers can vary by discipline, many articles generally have a particular format. For example, articles may contain introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion sections. Some disciplines require researchers to have each section clearly labeled for the audience. Some disciplines allow the author more freedom to name sections creative titles. All readers must figure out how the author has organized the articles and how sections are organized.

*Sections in Journal Articles*⁶

The following chart gives a brief overview of the sections of research articles. This brief overview can give you an idea of the various generic pieces of articles. For a longer description of these sections, please visit our [Introduction to Scholarly Reading](#) resource. Having a basic understanding of these sections is helpful before choosing a reading strategy.

| Section of Article | Reading Strategy |
|--|--|
| Abstract: <i>The abstract is a short and concise summary of the academic article.</i> | Read fully. Abstracts generally contain the author's research questions (or at least the research design of the article). |
| Introduction: <i>The introduction generally provides a quick overview of the topic and overview of the major point(s) of the paper. Most academic introductions begin with general comments about the topic and then mention a specific thesis, research question, or argument claim.</i> ⁷ | Skim (skimming is reading quickly in order to get an overview of the text; skimming is discussed further in our Reading Efficiently resource). |
| Literature Review: <i>The Literature review discusses prior studies or theories related to the topic.</i> | If you are new to the topic, you will need to spend more time reading the literature review section in order to understand why the researcher is discussing the topic and why it matters. |
| Methodology: <i>The Methodology sections explains how data was collected.</i> ⁸ | Skim first to pick out the basic method used. |
| Findings/Results: <i>This is the section where the author reminds the audience quickly what primary research they did (experiment, archival, case study) and reports the outcome of that research. The results are generally presented clearly and objectively.</i> | Read fully or read the final few paragraphs (depending on length). |
| Discussion/Argument: <i>This is usually the most important section of an academic article. It is usually where writers make a suggestion or claim about what they discovered or resolved. All the previous sections have been justifications for what the reader will say in the discussion/argument section.</i> | Review <i>Figures</i> in the discussion closely. Figures and tables provide data in visual and condensed form. If there are no Figures in the Discussion section, read the whole section carefully and fully. Before reading this section, you might read the abstract and methods section twice to help your understanding of what the article is saying. |

⁶ Adapted from [Critical Reading for Graduate Students](#) by Learning Strategies, Student Academic Success Services, 2013, Queen's University, Kingston, ON

⁷ Adapted from [Organization of a Traditional Academic Paper](#) by Writing Services, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC

⁸ Adapted from [Organization of a Traditional Academic Paper](#) by Writing Services, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC

| Section of Article | Reading Strategy |
|--|--|
| <i>Conclusion: Sometimes part of the discussion section.</i> | Read fully (especially if the conclusion is a separate section). |

More help: For more on the sections of articles, see the ELC's [Introduction to Scholarly Reading](#), which has further explanation on how to approach reading these sections. Find out more by reviewing [an example research paper with each section labeled](#).

Summary

Our Scholarly Reading Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide EAL learners the opportunity to better read and comprehend scholarly texts. For readers interested in more information about scholarly reading, please view our [Introduction to Scholarly Reading](#) resource.

We hope this guide will provide you with strategies for more productive scholarly reading. If you have questions, please contact elc@vanderbilt.edu.

Find this guide and more online at: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/scholarly-reading-guide/>