How to Read an Article

From our earliest introduction to written language, we're encouraged to take a linear approach. The alphabet song proceeds neatly from A to Z; stories start with "once upon a time" and end with "happily ever after." Scholarly writing is not storytelling, though; rather, scholars take information that may have been acquired through messy, circuitous, or complicated processes, and present it in an orderly, even rigorous framework. As a result, the most effective reading of scholarly writing actually requires the reader to unpack this tidily arranged information, and re-introduce a certain degree of its original messiness. As Paul Edwards (n.d.) notes in *How to Read a Book*, reading non-fiction from beginning to end is something you'll probably never have enough time to do.

The simple strategies that follow are some—but not all—of the ways that grad students and other frequent consumers of scholarly literature can make their reading process more efficient.

1. **Start at the ends.**

   Information tends to be concentrated at the beginning and end of articles—in particular, the abstract, the introduction, the conclusion, and the bibliography (or endnotes, or footnotes, depending on the publication venue). This is not to say that the middle isn't important; the actual data and detailed results of a research project are typically presented in the third or fourth section of an article, so the middle is often well worth reading. That said, reading both ends of an article first probably conveys at least 70% of what you'd get by proceeding through it from start to finish.

   The abstract, if it's a well-written one, contextualizes the research, summarizes the main findings, and offers some indication of the methods used and the conceptual approach or theoretical framework of the author(s). Keywords or index terms, if provided, tell you even more concisely what the article is about, so they're always worth a look if you're pressed for time, or the professor has just called on you and asked "So, what is [author's] piece, [title of article], about?" You'll probably find, on reading the introduction, that it repeats chunks of the abstract and expands upon them, providing additional context for why the author(s) felt the need to write the piece in the first place.

   Unsurprisingly, the conclusion (or any section toward the end that contains the phrase "implications for future research") can tell you why everything else that precedes it in the article should matter to anyone at all. If you only read one part of an article, in fact, it should be the conclusion; this is where the author answers the "so what?" question that your advisors and instructors will always be asking you about *your* research. The more of those answers you read, the more you'll understand what people want from you when they ask that question, and the more models you'll have for formulating effective conclusions in your own papers.

   Reading the end first also ensures that you're not fatigued by the time you've reached those last paragraphs. The conclusions, if you know them, can also help focus your attention on the most critical nuggets of data hiding amongst the charts, tables, or quoted interview transcripts of an especially juicy center section. Finally, starting at the end is a trick that works for writing as well as reading (as many of these tips do, in fact). In my experience, student papers often fall apart toward the end. Student writers who tackle the conclusion first, or at least keep it in mind

throughout their writing, tend to produce work that is stronger overall than those who write their way into the topic for a few pages, work until they're out of ideas, and hurriedly wrap it up with a sentence that starts "in conclusion…" because the paper deadline is in ten minutes. That's putting a sad trombone where you want a mic drop. Read (or write) the conclusion first, and you can see how the rest of the paper works to serve that end.

And whatever you do, don't forget the references! Read these for names, dates, article titles, and journal titles. With a little practice, you'll be able to determine the author's methodological approach, their disciplinary background, and perhaps the political or philosophical standpoint informing their argument—all without having read a word of their actual paper. Dates of works cited can give you a sense of whether the article offers a comprehensive survey of related literature, or whether it deals strictly with a more recent or historical subset of scholarly work. Bibliographies may also pique your interest and make you actually want to read articles you wouldn't have dipped into otherwise. For example, I might not initially be interested in a lit-crit piece about Lady Macbeth…but if the author cites articles about hallucinatory manifestations of blood phobias from the *New British Journal of Clinical Haematology*, I may very well decide to get his or her take on "out, out, damned spot"!

2. Look for landmarks.

Information similarly gets concentrated at the beginning and end of each section within an article, each chapter in a book, each essay in a collection, etc. It gets so concentrated, in fact, that you may find it expedient to skip some sections altogether after reading the first paragraph or two. If, for instance, you know quite a bit already about the research method used, you needn't do more than skim that part—and it will, most likely, be conveniently marked with a heading like "Project parameters." Learn to look for, and at, the section headings in an article and use them as a means of navigating through the content. Even when you find you must read each section, don't feel you always have to read them in the sequence presented, or in their entirety. Try combing through the first and last few passages in the section for topic sentences or summaries of the preceding paragraphs—again, you'll still get the majority of the content that way, and you won't tire yourself out doing it.

What you will also notice when you do this is that most journal articles—particularly pieces from similar disciplines—follow a fairly consistent structure. For example, articles in scientific journals (or even longer works like theses and dissertations) will very typically have six major sections: An introduction or problem statement, literature review, description of research methods and design, presentation of results, analysis or discussion, and conclusion. If you plan to publish work of your own, you should learn to recognize the structure followed by pieces in the journals you're submitting to, and make sure your own writing follows a similar pattern.

3. Keep a pen in your hand.

Chances are, you'll be reading journal articles or other scholarly literature with much more focused intent than you would bring to a novel or a magazine article. Get in the habit of blazing your trail through these texts: Mark the sections or sentences that are most critical to your understanding of the piece, highlight sources you want to track down and read later, make notes in the margins. You can do this even with electronic versions of articles—learn how to use

the markup tools in Adobe Reader, or annotate the entries in your citation manager if you use one (which you definitely should—see below).

Take notes as you read, too, whether they're interpretive or mnemonic. Writing while you're reading will help lodge the text more firmly in your memory (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). If you come across a particularly well-structured paper, try reverse-engineering it: Creating a detailed outline from the completed text will help you see more clearly its intellectual anatomy—how the author has linked each idea to the next to create a coherent narrative. For writing that is especially dense or difficult to plow through, you might find it helpful to translate or summarize chunks of it as you go, ending up with a précis in plain English that you can refer to later. (If you do this, though, be very careful to check the original text before using your paraphrased version in a paper, to avoid inadvertent plagiarism.)

4. Expect to read everything more than once…

There's no doubt about the fact that grad-school reading loads are heavy. Even the most conscientious students find it difficult to consume 500 pages (or more!) a week and actually digest any of it. Most of us will fall into the pattern of tackling the readings for each week of class just a few hours before the class actually meets. The advantage of this approach is that what you've read is fresh in your mind; the downside is that it doesn't get a chance to sink in before you discuss it. Whenever possible, try skimming the week's readings a few days in advance—just take in the heads and tails of each piece, and maybe a bit in the middle if you get caught up in it. Then pick it up again for a more thorough reading later, after it's bounced around in your mind for a bit, or a refresher the night before class. You may find that you get more from your readings by taking two quick passes through them than you do from one long slow slog!

If the readings for the week are ordered alphabetically in the syllabus, most students will have read "Adams, G. (2006)" by the time the class meets, but hardly any will be able to discuss "Zbigniew, J. (1977)." (If you are the one person who can, you'll be a total hero, so consider starting from the bottom once in a while!) In a week when your professor has assigned ten different articles, and you're working double shifts at your off-campus job and have nowhere near enough time to read all of them thoroughly, you must maximize the time you *do* have. Paradoxically, multiple passes will save you time here, too.

First look over the reading list and prioritize based on the titles, authors, and/or dates; then skim all of the articles in that *new* order. If necessary, re-order the list again after that first pass, so that you're diving back into what you think will be the most important pieces first, and leaving the less important ones for whatever time remains. Ask yourself which pieces touch on topics that are familiar, interesting, or relevant to your work; which studies describe or employ research methods you need to know more about; which authors are canonical or frequently cited in your other readings—these are the articles you should spend the most time with, and the ones you should expect to revisit in the future.

5. …But then again, don't count on ever reading it again.

While you may find yourself re-reading key works many times in the course of your academic and professional career, time is always going to be short, and you may find that a book or

electronic resource isn't available precisely when you need it again. In fact, you may not even remember where you originally read a piece of information that you want to cite or refer to later! This is super-frustrating. Try to prevent it by tracking the critical information you might need again in the future.

This means taking steps to ensure that your first pass through any piece of writing is an effective one. Collect complete citation information, including URLs or DOIs for online resources, for everything you read. Organize the resources you use for each project, paper, class, or line of research inquiry, so you can be sure of finding them again. If you read a passage you even *think* you might want to quote later, copy it to your citation manager as a note (once again being careful to indicate when it is a direct quote, to avoid inadvertent plagiarism) and indicate the page number, so you don't have to stop and refer back to the original when you're writing.

And once again: If you don't already use a citation manager like Endnote, Zotero, or Papers, start now. There are many good options available as free downloads, open source platforms, or shareware. Most have online or built-in tutorials that walk you through their basic features; many are compatible not just with library OPACs, WorldCat and Google Scholar, but can also slurp bibliographical metadata from commercial sites like Amazon. Some have note-taking features so you can store quotes or reflections on your reading. The longer you use them to build your research library, the more time and effort they will save you.

Good questions to ask yourself while reading works you'll need to discuss or cite:

1. What is different, new, or controversial here? What contribution does it claim to make?
2. Whom does the author call on as an intellectual ally? Where is this work sitting, conceptually?
3. Which other writers or theories, if any, does the author refute or counter-argue?
4. What is essential in this piece of writing? What is the single most important point being made?
5. What, if anything, could be removed without harm to the central argument?
6. How might you characterize the author's writing style? Is it typical of others in this discipline?

References

Edwards, P. N. (n.d.). How to Read a Book, v5.0. http://pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtoread.pdf

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