

HOW TO READ A RESEARCH PAPER



“To read is to voyage through time” (Sagan, 1980).

Reading is an essential human activity: we read for pleasure, for work, and for study. As a university student you will have to read to prepare for your classes, analyze sources necessary for course papers or synthesize significant bodies of literature for a major research paper or thesis. With so many pages to read every week during the term time, it is essential to read efficiently and strategically. Whether you are completing readings for an upcoming class or reading sources to inform your course paper, reading academic texts with your own writing in mind could be very fruitful.

Tip # 1 Establish a purpose for reading early on

When you sit down to read for academic purposes, you need to decide from the very outset what you need to get from the text. If you have to read a textbook chapter or a peer-reviewed article for the class, then your main purpose could be to grasp a new concept or a set of ideas that would be discussed by the professor in class. In other words, you need to understand the overall content to make better sense of a lecture or to be able to respond to in-class discussions.

Reading in order to write your own course paper requires a more active approach. Here, you need to start reading with a simple outline of your future writing and search for ideas, arguments, and specific concepts that you need to cover in the course paper. When focusing on a major piece of research writing, e.g. a literature review in the thesis, you should also look at the theoretical framework and methods used.

Tip # 2 Peer-reviewed article: definition

Reading material at the university level includes textbooks, monographs and edited volumes, and stand-alone peer-reviewed articles. Textbooks represent the most popular type of material professors assign to students. Many readers find the Survey – Question – Read – Recite – Record – Review (SQ4R) method useful to get the most from the textbooks. Peer-reviewed articles represent another popular genre of academic reading materials.. They are written by experts in their field in order to share new empirical data, innovative research methodology or a new theory with other scholars or students. If you are looking for several articles for your course paper or a range of sources for a research project, it is worth looking at the titles and abstracts to make the right choice of the literature.

Tip # 3 How to start reading an article

Once you get down to reading a particular article, whether to prepare for class or to produce your own writing a good strategy is needed. Most research papers follow a similar structure: Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion and Conclusion. First read the introduction to understand what are the big questions in the field that the article tries to answer. Then, read the literature review or the background section to see what is the gap in research that the authors are trying to fill with this particular article. Pay special attention to the research questions in the study.

Tip # 4 Where to find the most important details

Pay attention to the methods section to see how the authors are planning to answer their specific research questions. This section is especially crucial, if you are looking for data for your own study, however big or small. Essentially, the methods section is a how-to guide to do research. After that, you can move to the next part of the article, which usually takes the most space, Findings or Results. This is where the new data is presented. Often key details are visually represented in graphs, charts, and tables, so do not skip those. If you are pressed for time and need to skim multiple sources, visual data offers a shortcut to quick understanding of the findings. Follow up with the Discussion section, which should explain what findings mean and what the contribution of the study to the big questions in the field is. Ideas for further research are often presented in the Conclusion and Implications.

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Tip # 5 Stay active and organized while reading

To understand your reading thoroughly and ensure you remember the contents long enough, a couple of strategies could be particularly handy. When you read a paper make sure to take notes. They serve two goals: firstly, notes help you to better understand, synthesize and eventually remember the material; secondly, when reading with your writing in mind you should write down main ideas and direct quotes with page numbers as you go along. This way you will have all references ready and avoid inadvertent plagiarism by confusing your own words and ideas with those from your sources. There are some free apps to help you manage your references (e.g. [Zotero](#)) and organize readings (e.g. [Mendeley](#)) for a large or ongoing writing project.

Tip # 6 Final paper: be economical with your time

At the end of your course, your professor will normally expect you to produce a term paper, in which you will synthesize everything you learned during the semester. This genre of writing requires reading multiple sources in a short period of time. To choose 5 external sources you might need to sift through several dozens of articles you find in the [Ryerson Library Catalogue](#) or on [Google Scholar](#). You will not be able to read all of these initial sources, especially because some of them might not be relevant to your paper. Scan the titles, skim through the abstract and introduction to determine if you are going to be using this particular academic text to develop your ideas and use it as a reference. Even for those 5 external sources, reading from the first to last page is not always necessary. If you need to know what other authors said on the topic before, read the literature review section first; looking for data - head straight to the findings section before going over the rest of the article if necessary.

References

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