

Strategies for Reading Academic Articles

A handout adapted from Karen Rosenberg's article "Reading Games: Strategies for Reading Scholarly Sources"

Reading scholarly sources can be difficult. This handout provides strategies to help you read dense, lengthy academic articles efficiently and effectively.

1: Examine the article for its audience

Examine the article and its publisher for clues. Peer-reviewed academic journals are intended for scholars in that field, whereas popular titles (like *Time* or *Newsweek*) are intended for a more general audience. You may not be the primary audience for the text, and that's OK. If this is the case, the author may reference other scholarly works assuming that you've read them, or they may cite facts or events that you haven't learned about. If you encounter these elements, notice them, but try to keep moving through the article – sometimes you can keep moving without looking everything up. Also remember that if you are not the primary audience, you may not enjoy the writing style – so a little perseverance may be necessary!

2: Think about why your professor assigned this reading

You may not be the author's intended audience, but understanding the reason you've been asked to read the article can help you stay engaged and read with purpose. What subject will this article prepare you discuss? How does this article fit into the main questions or topics of the course? What will the instructor ask you to do with the knowledge you gain from the article?

3: Skim strategically to identify the main argument or idea in the text

Before you read the text from beginning to end, skim it strategically to locate the author's main purpose and argument. Having the author's purpose and main argument in mind can help you read and interpret the rest of the text. These are sections where you are likely to find info about purpose and main point:

- **The Abstract:** The abstract is an "executive summary" that appears in academic texts, usually as a paragraph at the top of the text. As you read the abstract, try to identify the text's purpose, the main problem or question it answers, what its main findings are, and why readers should care. Abstracts are densely written – do not despair if you must re-read them. It is worth researching the terms in the abstract if you do not understand them.
- **The Introduction:** This is a real gem: the introduction of an article often provides clear statements about the article's purpose, the question it answers, and its main point.

- **Conclusion:** Pay close attention here, even if you assume the conclusion might be repetitive. The author may re-phrase a key point in a way that makes it clearer to you. This may also be the only place in the paper where the author discusses unanswered questions. These questions can help prepare you for discussion or fuel a written reflection.

4. Skim for the article's organization or "architecture"

Before you read the text from beginning to end, skim it to get a sense of its organization or "architecture." Doing this gives you a mental map that helps you see the different parts of the article and how they function in the overall argument. This perspective can help you read and process the article more easily. Strategies for building a mental map of the article's organization include these:

- **The Introduction (again):** Look for a "forecasting statement" in the introduction. In addition to telling you about purpose and main point, the introduction often provides one or more statements that preview the article's content and structure. Such statements give you a road map that helps you interpret the rest of the article.
- **Section Headings:** Flip through the article to read through all the section headings. Doing so can help you see the article's overall structure. Again, look up any terms you do not understand.

As you read the body of the text

Use your knowledge about the main point of the article and context clues from your class as you decide which parts of the article deserve most of your energy, and where you can skim.

- Imagine you're reading an article and you're drowning in details about temperance's inter-movement politics. You're not sure if you should skim. If the **main point of the article** was that women's movements have changed their focus over time, then you could probably skim that section. If the main point of the article was to examine the role of class politics within feminist organizing, then you shouldn't skim.
- Similarly, the **main point of the course** may change how you read. For example, how you read an article about the correspondence between Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed will be different if you're in a history class (focus on socio-political references), or a literature class (focus on language and form), or a gender studies class (focus on expressions of love and masculinity).

Make It Social!

Engage with your professor and peers, discuss your questions, and help your friends out! Always keep in mind that reading academic writing means you're participating in a conversation.

Rosenberg, Karen. "Reading Games: Strategies for Reading Scholarly Sources." Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing. Ed. Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemilanksy. West Lafayette, Ind: Parlot 2010. 210-20. Print.