How to Read Journal Articles Like a Professor
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Version 1

Any time you sit down to read in graduate school, the first thing you need to do is to clarify your *purpose for reading*. This affects how closely you read the paper, where you focus your reading efforts, and even where you start reading the paper.

There are kinds of reading:
- Reading for substance
- Reading as a researcher
- Reading as a writer

As a beginning graduate student, it's helpful to do these three tasks separately, even if that means that you must read the paper more than once. As you get more skilled at reading academic research, you'll start doing multiple types of reading simultaneously.

Reading for Substance
This is the type of reading you learned how to do in high school. The goal is to understand "what is the main idea of this paper?"
- Focus on a paper's *intellectual contribution*: What do we know now from this paper that we didn't know before?
- The paper's abstract and conclusion are good places to begin your reading.
- Questions to ask yourself as you read:
    - What is the paper's research question?
    - What's the answer to that research question?
    - What (literal) people would be surprised by these findings? What are the paper(s)/book(s) against which the author is writing?
    - Where does this paper fit in the broader research conversation?
    - Based on this paper's findings, what don't we know? What kind of follow-up research is needed?
    - How does this paper fit with the other readings for the week?

Reading for substance is helpful to understand the research landscape, for writing literature reviews, and (for graduate students) when preparing for comprehensive exams. Think about it like the "reading comprehension" section of the standardized tests you took in elementary school: do you understand the paper's big idea and understand how that idea fits into the broader research landscape?

This is "low level" reading (think Bloom's taxonomy). As a result, it's a necessary (but insufficient) level of reading for a graduate seminar.

Reading as a Researcher
This is the type of reading that you want to become skillful at in graduate school. The goal is to *evaluate* the research and determine "is this research convincing?" This is a higher-level skill than reading for substance. But, you have to read for substance (know what the paper is trying to say) before you can read it as a researcher (evaluate whether the paper is convincing).

To read a paper as a researcher:
- Start, again, by identifying the broad research question.
- What is the *key comparison* the paper is trying to make?
    - This is generally an answer to the research question
    - Often stated as a formal hypothesis
    - "Units that _____ are more/less likely to _____."
- Then, using the methods/data section answer some specific questions:
    - What is the unit of analysis?
    - What is the scope of the paper's data? What potential observations (in terms of time/geography/etc.) are included? What is excluded?
    - Variables and Measurement
        - What is the dependent variable? How is it measured?
        - What is the key independent variable? How is it measured?
    - Research design
        - Is the author entitled to make causal claims? Under what assumptions? Are those assumptions tested? Are they met?
- Look for slippage in the research design ("blind" to the results)
    - What would the ideal test of the theory be?
        - What is the slippage from this ideal test?
        - What reasonable changes might result in a stronger test of the theory?
    - How does the paper's conceptual research question compare to the question the paper is actually able to answer using the data?
        - How are the paper's conclusions affected by the scope of the data collection (Geographic? Temporal?)
        - Would the author be able to make different/stronger conclusions with a different data source? Are those data reasonably available?
    - Think about the measurement of key concepts:
        - How does the paper operationalize key concepts?
        - How well do the theoretical constructs match the measurement strategy?
        - What evidence does the author provide that the measures are reliable? That they are valid?
- Look at the results
    - What is the key statistical test (e.g., p-value, coefficient, marginal effect)?
    - Do the results support the theory?
    - Are there other implications of the paper's theory that could be tested?
- Look at the conclusions
    - Do they follow from the results?
    - Does the author make conclusions that are beyond the scope of the paper's design?

Reading as a Writer
This is the type of reading necessary to understand how the author has conveyed their ideas and findings. This is not generally the type of reading you need to do for a weekly graduate seminar. But this is necessary when you start producing research.

Academic writing is a *genre*. As you begin to write your own research, it can be helpful to emulate articles that you have found successful. Understanding the construction of successful journal articles can help you figure out how to piece together your own research into an article format that is both comprehensible and convincing to readers.

To read a paper as a writer:
- Skim the paper, focusing on the paper's *organization*
    - What are the headings of each section?
    - What information is contained in each section?
    - How long is each section?
    - For articles you find particularly convincing, you might formally outline the paper
- Look at the paper's introduction
    - Can you identify the paper's *audience*? What sort of research does the author assume readers are familiar with?
    - Look at the paper's first paragraph. How does the author begin the paper? What's the level of abstraction?
    - Does the author preview the paper's findings in the introduction? The data? The methods?
    - How does the content of the introduction compare to the content of the abstract?
- Look at the paper's lit review and theory sections
    - Are they separate sections?
    - How many studies does the paper discuss? Are they discussed separately or integrated together?
    - How does the author juggle advancing an original argument with reviewing existing research?
- Look at the paper's methods and results section
    - How many tables and figures does the paper have?
    - What information is contained in the paper rather than an online appendix?
    - How detailed are the captions? Are the tables/figures self-contained?
- Look at the paper's discussion/conclusion section
    - How much of the paper's discussion is
        - Summary
        - Acknowledgement of weaknesses
        - Connection to other papers
        - Suggestions for future researchers

Preparing for a Graduate Seminar

- Successful seminar participation is about **contribution**. Everyone's class experience is enhanced—and the idea of a "seminar" relies upon—each of us coming to class prepared to add value to our discussions. So, for each article that you read, ask yourself: "what point do I want to make or what question can I ask that will enhance the class's discussion of this research?"
- After you finish reading the materials for class, take time to take a step back and consider the readings as a group:
    - How are the readings connected to one another? Are their points of agreement or contention between pairs of readings? What are the shared assumptions of the set of readings about how the topic is (or should be) studied? Are they good?
    - Try to group the readings together: which readings are topically interconnected?
    - What's the next step in this line of research?
    - How do these readings relate to those from other weeks of the course?
- It's ok to be unsure about something! It's often much better to come to class with a table/figure/passage that was unclear to you that you'd like us to discuss than it is to have a simple "yes or no" question to pose to the class. The former is much more likely to inspire a conversation than the latter.
- It might be helpful, at least at first, to **print hard copies** of the articles that you read. Alternatively, consider annotating the articles in a PDF reader. This way, your notes are in the same physical space as the text of the article. Sometimes it is difficult for students to find their notes about a section of an article quickly while the class's discussion is on a particular section of the paper, leaving them one step behind and in a position where they have trouble contributing to discussion.
- **Be generous**. It's easy to find fault with research but treat authors the way you hope future graduate students in this course will treat your own research. Constructive, actionable critique that engages the research on its own merits is the type of commentary you should seek to provide.