
SIX TOP TIPS FOR READING ACADEMIC ARTICLES

Don't panic. Expect that you will find the text confusing. This is usually because academics are very good thinkers, but they are not always very good writers! It might take two or three attempts to read the article before you feel comfortable with it. So here is some helpful advice.

First, make sure you do not have any distractions. Reading academic articles needs concentration, so you may want to find a quiet spot and ensure you are not going to get distracted by texts, phone calls or social media. Once you have practised reading academic articles you will find it much easier to deal with such distractions, but it is important that you read through the article from beginning to end the first time without any interruptions.

- 1) Read the article from beginning to end.** You may not understand much of it, but try to get the 'gist' or the essence of what is being said by the author. Underline any words you don't understand and come back to them later. Make some short notes on what you think the author is trying to say.

Second, academics have a number of bad habits. One of the worst is that they like to invent new words. New ideas sometimes need new words. And new ideas make people famous, so academics try to invent new words all the time (such as McDonaldization!). No-one knows what these words mean when they first read them, however good their vocabulary might be. If a word is a new concept, the book or paper you are reading will often include a definition or a citation to where it is defined. However, the longer a conceptual word has been around the less likely a definition will be provided. Academics also tend to use lots of rare words. In many textbooks you will find lots of examples of words which are not used everyday within the first few pages.

e.g. embodies, ambiguous, substantive, archetypal, orthodoxies, superordinate, concomitant, misconceive...

You might want to build a sort of glossary for yourself from the paper you are reading, looking up the conceptual terms from any references and using a dictionary for the rare (but ordinary) ones. I recommend the Oxford Concise English Dictionary.

- 2) Go through and look up all the words you are unfamiliar with** in the dictionary. Read the sentence or paragraph to be sure you have understood the correct meaning. **Read the entire paper again.**

Now at this point you are probably thinking "What? Why do I need to read everything again? It took me hours to read it the first time!" Well, the first time, most of your effort is being put into trying to understand the paper overall, getting the real meaning out of the sentences, and you can become lost in the detail. The second time around is when you can analyse the paper – get to the essence of the argument and identify its weaknesses and strengths. As we are normally reading these papers for a specific learning purpose, this is also when you can begin to disentangle the usefulness of the paper for your learning from the argument of the author.

- 3) Identify the argument**

The argument of a paper can sometimes be difficult to uncover at first. Especially if there are a lot of new conceptual words or 'jargon'. Jargon refers to words that are commonly used among a particular group of people (such as academic specialists) but are hard to interpret when you first encounter them. An argument is writing which follows a logical structure: it presents

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related combinations of facts or information in order to reach a conclusion. Of course, it can be difficult to understand whether the information given is 'true' (as it may well be a theory rather than a statement of fact). Frequently, the author will use two types of information: empirical evidence from recent research, and the work of key sources in the field. Sometimes, authors will include anecdotes or extracts from newspapers or other reporting media in place of empirical evidence, but this is not enough alone to build a strong argument. This information will be used to make points which together build up the argument. Identify each point that is being made in the argument, the connection being made between these points, and then what the conclusion is. The author will often include sentences which 'signpost' the argument to help you (e.g. 'What is implied by the body of literature is that...' 'In the next section I will go on to challenge how...'). Try to think about whether any aspect of this argument is weak or strong and why. Try to understand the author's perspective, and consider what they are taking for granted from that standpoint. Also look out for places where the author has not done what the 'signpost' suggested they would, or if they have only partly done so. You will find this task easier overall if you have a photocopied or printed reading as you will need to annotate the text.

- 4) **Identify key sources** that the author is using to present their argument. These are quotations or references which are being listed as either in agreement with the author, or which are in some way being added to by the article. Key sources may include authors whose work is being critiqued (identified as in need of improvement) in the paper.

Key sources are not all the sources in the paper, but you will find that some references are being repeated or stressed. This indicates the significance of a particular body of work to the argument that is being made.

- 5) **Look up the key sources** (you will usually find the reference details at the end of the paper) using a citation index, the university library systems, or [Google Scholar](#). Read the abstract of the paper or book which is being referenced and consider whether the author of the article has been fair in their representation of the source. If they have claimed the source is of central importance, look to see how frequently it has been cited in other articles or books.

By investigating these key sources you are not only investigating the strength of the paper you are reading, but also discovering more about the other arguments and writing on the topic. This can be key in uncovering debates and understanding author's positions in those debates.

- 6) Consider whether any of these key sources are helpful to your learning aims. If you think they might be, **build yourself a reading list** to go through. You may wish to ask the advice of your tutor as to whether the reading list is appropriate, but it will offer you a fantastic resource for further learning and essay writing. You need not restrict yourself to the sources themselves; often journal articles will be published in the same journal edition or in a special themed edition, which can highlight some important alternative perspectives on the issue at hand.

Reading around the subject is an important part of your university study, and time has been factored into your timetable to account for it. If you are unsure as to how many hours you should be spending on this type of activity, ask your tutor. Happy reading!