Reading for Research: Considering Scholarship as a Conversation

Before we begin discussing reading for research, it’s important for us to consider why scholarship exists. Scholars and researchers share their findings and their ideas to inform others, yes, but they are also engaging in a scholarly conversation with one another.

As new findings enter the field, scholars, researchers, and professionals discuss, argue, and elaborate on these findings based on their own perspectives and interpretations. So remember that the articles, books, and other sources that you read were not written in a vacuum – they are part of a dialogue with a community of scholars.

Scholarly Research Articles in the Social Sciences and Sciences

So what do we mean by a scholarly research article? We mean an article where original research was done by the authors and then published in a peer-reviewed journal.

In the social sciences and sciences, original research is typically a study or experiment that uses qualitative or quantitative data to test ideas and make conclusions.

When we find a scholarly research article, it’s best to review the abstract first to determine if the source is relevant to our topic. This is a brief summary of the article, and it will summarize the main ideas, and possibly the major findings. You may also be able to identify words to search in the abstract, in the author supplied keywords, or in the subject headings listed that you can use to search for other sources.

When reading for research, you may not need to read the article word for word. Instead, you can focus on various parts of the article to find the essential information you need to understand the main ideas.

The introduction can allow you to better understand the thesis of the article. The literature review or the background section can provide information about other scholarship in the field and is a great place to find other resources for your topic. At the end of the article, look at the references or works cited section. You can use the citations in the references section to find additional sources on your topic.

In a research article, skimming the methods section is a good idea. This will let you know how the research study was done, who the participants were, and what tests, if any, were conducted.

The results section tells you about the specific findings that were gathered from this research. The results can be very technical, and while it is good to review them and to look at the graphs and tables you may find there, you might understand the results better by thoroughly reading the discussion or conclusion sections. These put the results in clearer language and draw out the conclusions and implications of the study. They answer the question “So what?”
these results show [or mean] for a particular population? These sections also may offer suggestions for future studies as well.

One section that often appears toward the end of research articles is the limitations section. This section details what the authors see as possible shortcomings in their research—for example if participants didn’t follow directions, or they identified some other research design issue. It’s important for the authors to be upfront about these limitations so that the conclusions do not overreach the scope of the study.

That is a quick overview of reading for research in the sciences and social sciences. Let’s turn our attention to reading in the humanities.

**READING FOR RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES**

Reading for research in the humanities is different than in the sciences and social sciences because the books, chapters, and scholarly articles in the humanities often do not have a formal research design.

Instead, these sources provide an extended analysis or interpretation of historical, cultural, philosophical, religious, or artistic works and ideas. We often need to read these sources more closely, since the ideas develop and expand throughout the work. The introductions and conclusions however can still give us information about the major argument of the work.

When we read scholarly articles in the humanities, the abstract will also tell us about the relevance of the article to our research. When we are reading books for research, we can visit the table of contents and the index to see if the book or some of the chapters in the book are relevant to our topic.

For example, if you are looking at jealousy in Othello, you might not find a book particularly on that topic by searching QuickSearch. However, looking at books on Shakespeare’s writings, like this one called *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England*, could lead to relevant information. If you look up jealousy in the index, you see that in Othello is one of the subtopics of jealousy. You just need to check out the pages listed here to see if it’s relevant.

Remember, you don’t necessarily have to read the entire book when you are reading for research. Particular chapters or even perhaps particular sections may be all you need to closely read to give you valuable information for your own project.

Understanding the context and the scholarly conversation is very important in researching for the humanities. So make sure that you identify the sources that the chapter or the article cites. Finding these cited sources can allow you to better understand the scholarly conversation surrounding your topic.