

READING AN ACADEMIC ARTICLE

The challenge when reading a dense scholarly article is to focus simultaneously on the case study (the story the author is relating), on the “big question” the author is addressing (the analytic point the author wants to make about/through the case study), and on the “quality” of the article as a sample of scholarship.

Unless your instructor tells you otherwise, you do not have to take detailed, line-by-line notes on articles you read. I suggest, instead, that as you read you think about answers to the below questions.

Before I start any article reading, I put these general headings on my notepaper. I make few notes as I read, and then write down a short response under each heading when I finish reading.

Some students find it helpful to turn these questions into a form they fill out on paper or in a word processor. This is an investment of time up front, but if you use this method you will be very well-prepared for class and tutorials, and you will be thrilled with how easy it is to review your reading notes at test or exam time.

QUESTIONS

Use these questions to understand and critically think about scholarly articles as you read:

1. The case study or story: **What** is the author telling me in this story? Summarize the key elements of the story in 2-3 elements.
2. The “big picture”: **Why** is this author telling me this story? What larger point is the author trying to make about why the story told in the article is important? What is the “big picture”?
Find the “why” in the article or restate it in your own words in 1-2 sentences.
If the “question” or “why” underlying the article is difficult to identify, this is probably a weakness in the article.
3. Has the author done a good job of supporting his/her answer to this question? Of proving his/her case? Is there enough evidence to prove the case? Again, jot down an answer in 1-2 sentences, perhaps noticing a particularly convincing (or unconvincing) part of the argument.
4. Do I agree with the answer? Note that this is a different question than #3. The author could have done a relatively poor job of supporting an argument you generally agree with, or a very good job or presenting an argument you disagree with.
5. What was really striking in this piece? Do I want to identify a particular quote or example that I thought was remarkable because it proved the author’s point, or because it seemed to indicate an alternate explanation for the “story”? (Or, because it was very difficult to understand and I’m lost...)

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6. Are there key concepts or vocabulary that appear in this article that I need to remember (touched on in class, pointed out by the instructor)? Can I list them, and job down brief definition? Can I identify terms for which I need more explanation?
7. How is this article connected to the other things I am reading in this course? What themes or connections are appearing? (A short list might work well here, though often I find this is where I end up writing the most as I explore my new ideas. Your answers under this heading will be VERY VALUABLE as you study for tests and exams.)
8. What questions do I have after reading this article?

REFERENCES

Balcom, K. (2012). *Guidelines for reading an academic article* [Workshop handout]. McMaster University, Hamilton, ON.