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Scholarly Reading Guide: Introduction to Scholarly Reading

created by

The Vanderbilt University English Language Center

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What are our Scholarly Reading Guide resources?

Our Scholarly Reading Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners at Vanderbilt University the opportunity to better read and comprehend scholarly texts.

Introduction to Scholarly Reading provides learners with strategies to:

- navigate the organization of peer-reviewed and scholarly articles
- improve scholarly reading comprehension, speed, and fluency

Definition of Scholarly Reading

Scholarly reading is a complicated skill where readers must navigate the organization of a scholarly article, comprehend the research the journal article is discussing, and understand the importance of that research in their discipline. Scholarly articles are quite different than other texts. For example:

- Reading journal articles requires different knowledge and strategies than other types of reading, such as magazines or fiction.
- Journal articles are organized in specific ways, which is different than other types of reading.
- Journal articles require specific reading strategies to improve your reading rate and comprehension as well as your ability to understand how the research is connected to other research in your field or discipline.

Reading Research Articles¹

Research papers and journal articles are the most common types of scholarly reading as they are the means by which students learn information in their specific field and the new contributions made by researchers and authors. While the structure of research papers can vary by discipline, many research papers generally have a particular format, such as introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Some disciplines require researchers to have each section clearly labeled for the audience. Some disciplines allow the author more freedom. When a research paper has clearly labeled sections, it can appear easy to read. However, writers sometimes condense information in certain sections to save space, which can make it harder for readers to understand. In such cases, readers must determine what information the author is providing and what information the author assumes the reader knows.

While it is important to understand the topic you are reading about, knowing the ways scholarly articles are organized can help you see the bigger picture of published research. Scholarly reading includes critical thinking—the ability to comprehend the importance, meaning, limitations, and future value of a specific kind of research.

Create a Reading Plan²

With so many sections in research articles, it is important to create a reading plan. The following table summarizes this guide's information pertaining to the purpose of research article sections. While each discipline varies slightly, readers can use this type of chart for quick reference if looking for specific information or to see how each piece connects to other pieces in articles:

¹ Adapted from *Critical Reading for Graduate Students* by Learning Strategies, Student Academic Success Services, 2013, Queen's University, Kingston, ON

² Adapted from *How to Read (and Understand) a Social Science Journal Article* by Laubepin, 2013, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, p. 2

Table 1: Information in Article Sections

Look for...	Title	Abstract	Introduction	Literature review	Methods & data	Results	Discussion & Conclusion	References
The big picture	🔍	🔍						
More detail			🔍				🔍	
Main points		🔍					🔍	
New claims		🔍					🔍	
Data analyses					🔍			
Graphs & Tables						🔍		
Theory		🔍		🔍			🔍	
Implications							🔍	
Publications on this topic				🔍				🔍
What is known about this topic			🔍	🔍				

If you are struggling to understand a specific paragraph, look back at the section heading. If the paragraph is located in the methods section, then there is a good chance the paragraph is about how data was collected even if you do not fully understand what you read.

Graphs and Tables³

Graphs, tables, and diagrams are often inserted into scholarly articles to clarify complex ideas or to present evidence and findings from research. These visuals help supplement the words and paragraphs. Reading a visual will often help you understand the written text.

- Read the title of a visual to help you understand what the visual means.
- Visuals often present information both vertically and horizontally, so be sure to read the visual both ways.

Implications

Research implications are often mentioned in the abstract or discussion—implications are the conclusions that can be drawn from the research that was conducted. When you are reading scholarly texts, consider looking at the implications first to determine if an article is related to your topic.

³ *Academic Reading and Study Skills for International Students* by Rosenthal and Rowland, 1986, Pearson College
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Theory

Some disciplines use numerous theories in their arguments rather than using previous studies. If your discipline uses theories as evidence, you might consider reading the literature review section fully to determine what theories were used for the writer's argument even if you are familiar with the topic.

Limitations

Research limitations are the types of claims or arguments that cannot be made from the data. If you are reading an article for its limitations, they are generally mentioned in the discussion section.

Publications on This Topic

Reference lists can contain important research connected to the topic. When reading reference lists:

- look for authors that appear several times.
- look for words that appear several times—this can help you understand the common language that your discipline uses related to the topic.

Article Sections: Where to Begin and How to Read⁴

Abstract

The abstract is a short and concise summary of a scholarly article.

Read the abstract fully since it generally contains the author's research questions or the research design.

Introduction⁵

The introduction provides the rationale for a scholarly article and draws the audience into reading it. Most introductions begin with general comments about the topic and then mention a specific thesis, research question, or argument claim. The introduction generally provides a longer overview of the topic and overview of the major point(s) of a scholarly article.

Skim the introduction. See our [Reading Efficiently](#) resource for helpful tips on skim reading.

Literature Review

Since most research is based, in some way, on the research that came before it, the literature review discusses important studies, texts, theories, historical events, etc., that inform the research being done.

If you are new to a topic, you will need to spend more time reading the literature review section in order to understand why the researcher is discussing the topic and why it matters. If you have read multiple scholarly articles in one particular area or topic, you will need to decide how much time you have to devote to reading the literature review of each article.

⁴ Adapted from *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: A Course for Nonnative Speakers of English* by Swales & Feak, 2012, The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

⁵ Adapted from *Organization of a Traditional Academic Paper* by Writing Services, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC

Methodology⁶

The methodology section justifies the research by showing what the author did. In scholarly articles using mainly secondary research, the methodology section will generally provide the background or history for understanding the topic. In articles using mainly primary research, the methodology section generally gives a detailed description of the experiment or study design.

Skim first to pick out the basic method used. See our [Reading Efficiently](#) resource for helpful tips on skim reading.

Results/Findings

This section is included in scholarly articles that use primary research data that the researchers collected themselves, such as interviews, observations, or ethnographic research. This is the section where the author reminds the audience quickly what primary research they did and reports the outcome of that research. The results are generally presented clearly and objectively.

Read fully or read the final few paragraphs, depending on length.

Discussion/Argument

The Discussion section is usually the most important section of a scholarly article because it is where writers make a suggestion or claim about what they discovered or figured out. All of the previous sections have been justifications for what the writer will say in the discussion/argument section. In articles that rely on primary research, the discussion/argument section is usually where the author will interpret the results of the primary research. For example, if the research article describes an experiment or case study conducted by the author, the author will provide the results of the experiment/case study in the findings/results section. Then, the author will interpret what those results mean in the discussion/argument section. The author might also critique the results or suggest further research needed in this section.

Review figures in the discussion closely. Figures and tables provide data in visual and condensed forms. If there are no figures, read this section carefully and fully. Before reading this section, you might read the abstract and methods section twice to help your understanding of what the article is saying.

Conclusion

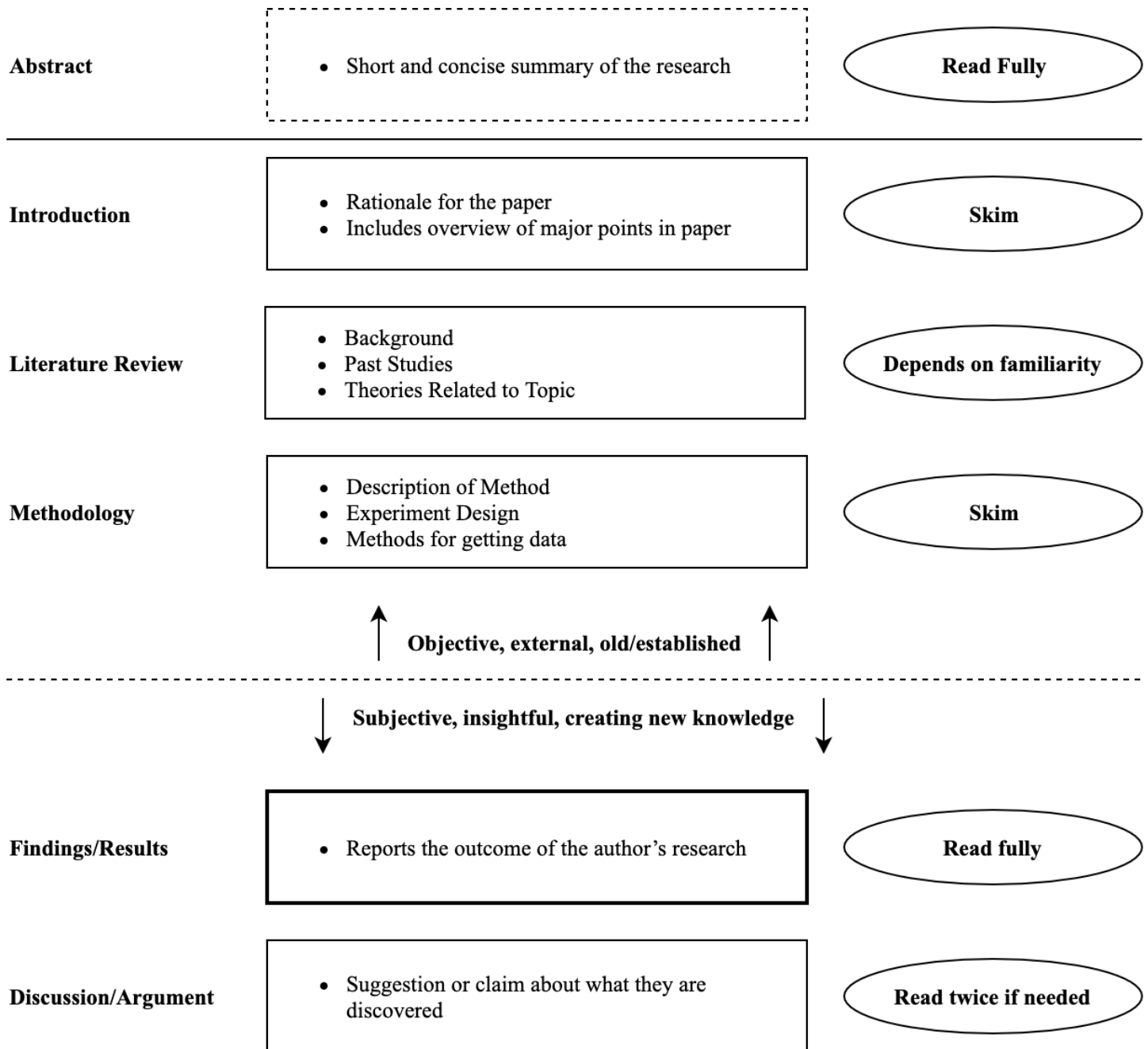
The conclusion section might be included in the discussion section. This section can help you understand what the author is suggesting happens now that the research has been conducted.

Read fully—especially if the conclusion is a separate section.

⁶ Adapted from [Organization of a Traditional Academic Paper](#) by Writing Services, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC
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The article as a whole

To help see the connection between all these parts of scholarly articles, look at the following visual. The visual lists each section in order with helpful suggestions on which sections to read fully and which you might consider skimming in order to determine the article's relevance to your scholarly work.



Find out more by reviewing [an example research paper with each section labeled](#) or [the basic organization of academic articles](#).

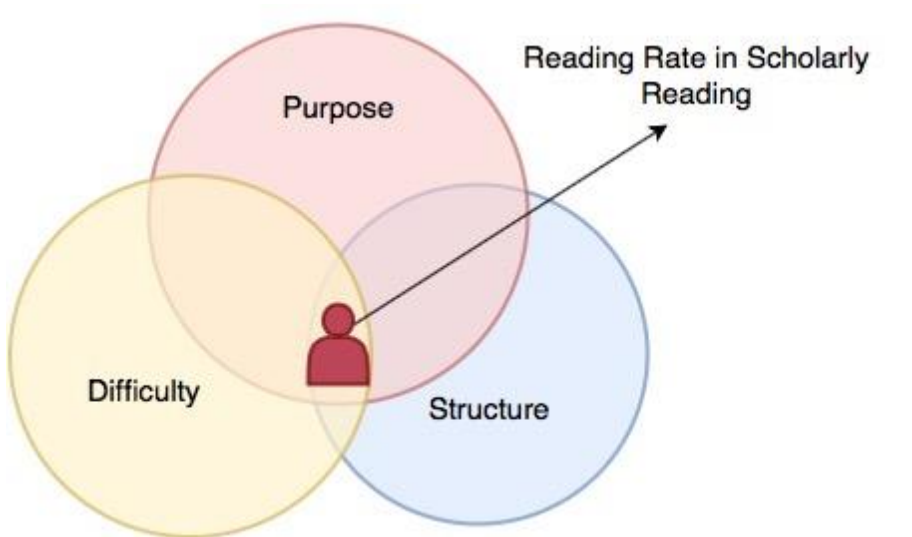
Determining Your Scholarly Reading Rate

Your reading rate is how quickly you are able to read and comprehend a text. There are ways to increase your reading fluency, speed, and comprehension of scholarly articles. Understanding the reasons your reading rate slows down or what increases your reading rate is a good place to start.

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*What determines and impacts reading rate?*⁷

Reading rate is often affected by the **purpose**, **difficulty**, and **structure** of what you are reading.



Purpose

Your purpose in reading a text can determine your reading rate. Know the purpose for reading the material and choose a reading strategy that allows you to gather the information you need without losing valuable time.

In scholarly reading, the reader often has different purposes. For example, you might be reading an article to understand the content or to analyze the type of experiment or type of research.

Knowing your purpose for reading an article will often determine how quickly or slowly you read. For example, if you only need to know what the research article concluded, you might read the article to understand information by skimming the article quickly for what you need.

- To *understand information*, you might find skimming or scanning the text at a rapid rate helps you get the information you need quickly.
- To *analyze the content of a text*, read at a moderate pace that permits you to comprehend the text.
- To determine the value of material or to read for enjoyment, read rapidly or slowly according to your interest.

⁷ Adapted from *Critical Reading for Graduate Students* by Learning Strategies, Student Academic Success Services, 2013, Queen's University, Kingston, ON
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Difficulty

Another aspect of reading that determines your reading rate is the difficulty, or nature, of an article. Be prepared to spend more time with scholarly articles when a topic is new for you. The complexity of the topic might also slow your reading rate. If the topic covers a wide range of theories that you are not familiar with, you might need more time to read and comprehend the material.

You might find yourself with limited background knowledge on some topics in articles. A limited background on a certain subject may indicate you need to spend more time reading an article.

Structure

How a scholarly article is organized can impact your reading rate. Many scholarly articles have similar features or sections; however, some authors also have autonomy to expand sections in articles because of their discipline. It is important to understand how articles are organized but be aware of how individual authors tailor articles for specific topics and adjust your reading rate accordingly. It is common to take time reading articles with complex organization—especially if an author is writing in a discipline that allows for a larger range of article structures.

What slows down your reading rate?⁸

Be aware there are certain things that slow readers down. High-achieving readers avoid **regressing** and **fixating**.⁹

Regressing

Regressing is when a reader looks back on previously seen words, as indicated using arrows in the example below:

Research shows how reading can be improved by avoiding regressing while reading.



If you find yourself going back to other words you have seen, consider using a ruler as you read. Cover up the words or sentences after you have read them. That way your eyes will not get distracted by words you have already read.

Fixating

Fixating is when a reader looks at every word while reading instead of focusing on what the sentence says. Fixating on specific words or fixating on each word can slow readers down.

If you find yourself concentrating on every single word, try to predict the meaning of the sentence.

⁸ Adapted from *More Than Meets the Eye* by Barnett, 1989, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall and *Reading Development in a Second Language* by Bernhardt, 1991, Norwood, NJ: Ablex

⁹ Adapted from *Critical Reading for Graduate Students* by Learning Strategies, Student Academic Success Services, 2013, Queen's University, Kingston, ON

What else slows you down?

- An inability to distinguish important from unimportant information
- Being unfamiliar with common scholarly language that signals scholarly arguments
- Fears, such as losing comprehension
- Poor attention and concentration, possibly influenced by getting distracted by people or social media
- Habitual slow reading and continuing slow reading habits

What Speeds up Your Reading Rate?

- Understanding the structure and purpose of the research you are reading can speed you up.
- Various strategies such as skimming, scanning, while-reading, and graphic organizers can improve reading comprehension, rate, and speed. Many of these strategies are discussed in our [Reading Efficiently](#) resource.
- Reading different sections of research articles in different ways can improve reading rate.¹⁰ Remember, a scholarly article can be difficult to understand and grasp when read from start to finish.

Summary

Our Scholarly Reading Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide EAL learners the opportunity to better read and comprehend scholarly texts. For readers interested in more information about scholarly reading, please view our [Strategies for Reading and Comprehending Scholarly Texts](#) resource.

We hope this guide will provide you with strategies for more productive scholarly reading. If you have questions, please contact elc@vanderbilt.edu.

Find this guide and more online at: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/scholarly-reading-guide/>

¹⁰ *Improving Reading Skills Through Skimming and Scanning Techniques at a Public School: Action Research* by Diaz & Laguado, 2013, *Opening Writing Doors Journal*, 10(1), pp. 133-150
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