

How to Read a Scholarly Article

Reading scholarly material requires a new set of skills. You simply cannot read an article or monograph as if it were pleasure reading and expect it to make sense. Yet neither do you have the time to read every sentence over and over again. Instead, you must become what one author calls a "predatory" reader. That is, you must learn to quickly "hunt down" the important parts of the scholarly material. The most important thing to understand about a piece of scholarly writing is its argument. Arguments have three components: the problem, the solution, and the evidence. Understanding the structure of an essay is key to understanding these things. Here are some hints on how to determine structure when reading scholarly material:

Start with the front matter: Notice the title, author (and her/his academic institution), title of the journal, date of publication, and perhaps an abstract that gives you a summary of the article's major points and findings.

1. **Think pragmatically.** Each part of a well-crafted argument serves a purpose for the larger argument. When reading, try to determine why the author has spent time writing each paragraph. What does it "do" for the author's argument?
2. **Identify "signposts."** Signposts are the basic structural cues in a piece of writing. Is the reading divided into chapters or sections? Are there subheads within the reading? Subheads under subheads? Are the titles clearly descriptive of the contents, or do they need to be figured out (such as titles formulated from quotations)? Are there words or concepts in the titles (of the piece, and of subheads) that need to be figured out (such as unusual words, or metaphors)?
3. **Topic sentences.** Topic sentences (usually the first sentences of each paragraph) are miniature arguments. Important topic sentences function as subpoints in the larger argument. They also tell you what the paragraph that follows will be about. When reading, try to identify how topic sentences support the larger argument. You can also use them to decide if a paragraph seems important enough to read closely.
4. **Evidence.** Pieces of evidence -- in the form of primary and secondary sources -- are the building blocks of historical arguments. When you see evidence being used, try to identify the part of the argument it is being used to support.
5. **Identify internal structures.** Within paragraphs, authors create structures to help reader understand their points. Identify pairings or groups of points and how they are related. Where are they in the hierarchy of the argument? Hierarchy of major points is very important, and the most difficult to determine. Is the point a major or a minor one? How can you tell?
6. **Examine transitions.** Sometimes transitions are throwaways, offered merely to get from one point to another. At other times, they can be vital pieces of argument, explaining the relationship between points, or suggesting the hierarchy of points in the argument.
7. **Identify key distinctions.** Scholars often make important conceptual distinctions in their work.

8. **Identify explicit references to rival scholarly positions.** Moments when a scholar refers directly to the work of another scholar are important in understanding the central questions at stake.
9. **Stay attuned to strategic concessions.** Often authors seem to be backtracking, or giving ground, only to try to strengthen their cases. Examine such instances in your readings closely. Often, these signal moments where authors are in direct conversation with other scholars. Such moments may also help steer you toward the thesis.
10. **Remember that incoherence is also a possibility.** Sometimes it is very difficult to determine how a section of a piece is structured or what its purpose in the argument is. Remember that authors do not always do their jobs, and there may be incoherent or unstructured portions of essays. But be careful to distinguish between writing that is complex and writing that is simply incoherent.

Finally, remember that you cannot read each piece of scholarship closely from start to finish and hope to understand its structure. You must examine it (or sections of it) several times. It is much better to work over an article several times quickly -- each time seeking to discern argument and structure -- than it is to read it once very closely.

The most important pages in a scholarly article are usually the first 2-3 pages and the last 2-3 pages. In fact the answers to many of these questions will be found at the beginning and/or end of the article. Thus before you delve into the article, spend a few minutes reading the first couple of pages and the last couple of pages (don't worry about spoiling the ending, unlike literary writers, scholars seldom finish their works with a big surprise). The important thing is that you understand what the author is trying to say; you can then read the full article and determine for yourself whether he or she has done an adequate job of arguing the point.

Resources:

Adapted from "Predatory Reading," <http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/predatory%20reading.htm>

University of Maryland, "Parts of an Article" http://www.lib.umd.edu/CHEM/Parts_of_an_Article.html

Lifhack, "How to Read Like a Scholar," <http://www.lifhack.org/articles/productivity/advice-for-students-how-to-read-like-a-scholar.html>