Effective reading strategies for extended work

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The writing process
One word at a time

This session will cover

Part 1
How to approach and navigate academic sources
Part 2
The strategic reading framework and how to use it.

Part 1

Approaching and managing academic sources

Why we need to think strategically about reading

All researchers need to find strategies they can use to approach, manage and organise academic sources, to avoid getting lost and overwhelmed.

This section will cover:

- The structure of journal articles and books

- Where to start with an academic text

The anatomy of an academic source: the naming parts

Books

1. Preface or foreword
2. Introduction
3. Literature review
4. Chapters
7. Conclusion
8. References

Articles

1. Abstract (and keywords)
2. Introduction
3. Literature review
4. Methods (for sciences)
5. Analysis (for sciences)
6. Discussion
7. Conclusion
8. References

The anatomy of an academic source: dissecting the text

- Is the text relevant to your study? You don't need to read the entire text to establish this – you can skip!

- Start with the abstract or introduction/preface.

- Then read the introduction, conclusion and reference list – this should give you a good understanding of whether the text is useful to you.

- If it is, re-read from start to end. If not, move on!

However, in order to assess whether the text in question is going to help you, you need to think a little about what you need from it…

Part 2

A strategic framework for reading academic texts

Strategic reading: an introduction

Overwhelmed by the amount of reading you have to do? Not sure when to stop reading and start writing? Never really stop to think what you actually need from a text?

The strategic reading framework can help!

Strategic framework: an overview

1. Identifying the stage you're at with reading the text in question

2. Establishing the purpose of your reading

3. Choosing your reading method

4. Choosing your note-taking strategy (covered previously and available online)

5. Critical reading

Strategic reading step 1: what stage are you at with your reading?

You'll need different things from your reading depending on whereabouts you are in the project process, and knowing which stage you're at will help you to manage the overwhelm! Here are some examples of which stage you might currently be in:

1. Preliminary reading: you need to scope out a new, unfamiliar topic to get an overview

2. In-depth reading: you're following/challenging the text closely to get a thorough understanding of an area where you've already mastered the basics.

3. Critical reading: you're critiquing the sources to establish their validity, quality and relevance AND/OR you're making connections and finding patterns in a body of scholarship you know fairly well

4. Detailed reading: you're hunting for references, facts, data, definitions, quotations etc.

These stages aren't necessarily neat and linear – you might return to the same text or same stage to revisit it.

Strategic reading step 2: why are you reading this?

Establishing a purpose for your reading is crucial – ask yourself what this text can do for you and your work.

- What questions do you need this text to answer for you? N.b. You can stop reading once these questions have been answered.

Examples of what you might want/need from a text:

- A general overview of, or introduction to, a topic
- A better understanding of a key concept/person/model/event
- A specific piece of information: some data, a quotation, a formula, a reference
- A critical judgement of the existing research (other people's lit. reviews are at your disposal!)
- A researcher's analysis or argument to compare with others
- Evidence to support your own argument

Strategic reading step 3: choosing a reading method

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Strategic reading step 3: how to skim and scan read

Scan and skim reading are strategies which involve focusing on specific key sections of a text, as opposed to every word. Skimming and/or scanning a text is...

- Not cheating! It's a skill that researchers need in order to get through large quantities of information
- A good idea if you're new to the text, even if you're eventually going to be reading it in-depth

Scanning

Scanning a text is where you identify and focus on finding information about a specific topic. It's about making the text work for you, so that you find an answer your question without getting overwhelmed with material you don't need.

Skimming

Skim reading is extracting the 'big picture' information rather than examining the details, by focusing on the key sections outlined on the previous slide.

Strategic reading step 3: scan reading

Scan read if you want: information on a specific topic that you have already defined, find out what a well-known scholar has said about a topic, factual details rather than conceptual complexities…

Example: "I need to know what Foucault says about Jeremy Bentham"

- Start with the index rather than the introduction

- Look at chapter or section headings to see if your topic is discussed in a specific part of the text

If the text is digital, you have more – and more efficient – options:

- Keyword search for your topic

- There is usually a search icon with e-books

- Ctrl+F keys will work with PDFs (for journal articles), website text, and Word documents

An automated keyword search will usually give you less nuanced information than a well-compiled index, which can present you with new ways of thinking about your topic and relates to other subjects.

Strategic reading step 3: skim reading

Skim read if you want: an overview of a whole text, to get through an important text efficiently, to become familiar with the main arguments/occurrences of a key text...

Example: "I need to know what the key arguments are in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*"

Skim reading is extracting the 'big picture' information rather than examining the details, by focusing on the key sections. This 'big picture' information will be found in

- Abstracts
- Introductions
- Conclusion
- Graphs/illustrations
- In addition to main sections, look out for subheadings and text in bold to help you 'navigate'

Strategic reading step 5: critical reading

Critical reading involves questioning and challenging a text, evaluating how valid its arguments are, and making connections between individual pieces of research on a given topic.

The full framework is available on the ASK website and offers a longer list of critical questions to ask of your text. However, here are some key examples of critical questions to think about when reading and taking notes:

- How is this text significant to you and how might you make use of it?
- What contribution does the text make to our existing knowledge?
- How has it changed your understanding of the subject?
- What's your position on the claims/arguments presented - are you convinced or not?
- What have the writers overlooked - are there any identifiable gaps/limitations?
- Does it contradict, support or challenge other evidence you've seen elsewhere?

Strategic reading step 5: strategies for critical reading (PMI)

The PMI tool (de Bono, 1988) : a good place to start if you're stuck

P – 'plus' (something positive about the source)

Examples: meaningful findings, clear communication, effective methodology, large sample size, transparency about limitations, convincing argument

M – 'minus' (something negative about the source)

Examples: limited/overstated findings, reliant on one method/data type, unsuitable method/data type, bias or conflict of interest, data manipulation

I – 'interesting' (something interesting about the source)

Examples: novel approach or method(s), findings differ from similar sources, insightful argument, innovative style/structure/presentation of data

Strategic reading step 5: strategies for critical reading (three domains)

Three domains of critical thinking
Reviewing the literature and critiquing scholarship

	Validity: On its own terms	Synthesis: In relation to others	Relevance: Usefulness to you
Context: discipline/profession, authors, currency, bias			
What are they doing? Research Question/Aims/Hypothesis			
How did they do it? Methods, Models and Materials			
How do they know? Argument, evidence, logic and reasoning			
What do they say? Findings and conclusions			

Questions, comments, advice?
Ask us

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