

How to Dissect an Article in Graduate School

The first question to ask: Why am I reading this?

1. It's an assigned reading
2. In preparation for a paper
3. To add to my knowledge of a subject

Why you are reading the article will have much to do with *how* you read the article.

Questions to ask of all articles

1. Do the authors deliver on the promise of the abstract? What was the stated goal of this study? Read the paper with these promises in mind
2. Why did the author write this article? To summarize new findings? To disagree with the currently held position? What problem is the author trying to address?
3. What is the significance of the problem the author is trying to address? How is it defined?
4. What is the author's theoretical framework? A particular theory?
5. How good are the basic components of the article? Is the literature comprehensive or one sided? Is the research design well thought out or flawed?
6. Does the author acknowledge the limits or flaws in the study?
7. How does this article contribute to my understanding of the issue?
8. Do I agree or disagree with the basic conclusion of this article? How can I use these findings?

Assigned Readings

Assigned readings are usually a book chapter or article. Most students are well versed in reading a textbook. However, reading several articles for a class may be a new experience.

The most important question: What is the core message in this article that I am supposed to understand?

- Be efficient - only read what you need to!
Start by reading the abstract. Then skip to the last few paragraphs of the conclusion. Doing this will help orient you within the article. Then start with introduction and read through.
- What problem are they trying to solve? Why did they choose this method?
- What is their approach?
- How is it different from other approaches?
- What is new about this article?
- As you run across things you don't understand, mark them!
Review your questions before class so that you can participate in the discussion.

- Condense your understanding of the article into four or five sentences. Write these down! You will be doing a lot of reading and what seemed clear in September may be a distant memory by the end of November.

Student Tip: “I write all over my assigned articles. I write my summary sentences, questions, thoughts etc. on the actual article. I also write down comments from the professor or others in class have on the article. I have found this useful because 1) Less paper to keep up with 2) You can quickly refresh yourself on the article by reading your side notes 3) Your articles become an archive of your thinking.”

In preparation for a paper

Almost all papers will require you to review the existing literature. Starting a literature review can be intimidating, especially when your first search turns up 2,857 relevant articles. How do you prioritize?

- When you search for article, many search engines include the option to link to articles that cited the current paper. A paper that has been widely used by other authors is probably a good paper and key to the issue.
- Similarly, pay attention to the bibliographies of papers. Is one article or author consistently appearing? Find that article or person.
- Now that you have a few articles, read the abstract first. Based on the abstract you can often eliminate the article. It may address a population or issue that you are not interested in.
- Key questions:
 1. Does this article support my thesis or argue a new point?
 2. How does this article relate to my other articles?
 3. What do I think about the quality of the research?

Student Tip: “I copy and paste the text of several (more than 15) articles into a word document to review. I cross out the abstracts that are not relevant and circle the ones to keep. If you do this for several days, you will have identified a core of articles that you can invest your time in without having to read all the articles or print out hundreds of pages of paper.”

To add to my knowledge of a subject

As you research your assigned papers, you will probably run onto things that look interesting, but do not apply to your assignment. Great! Reading is never wasted.

Student Tip: “I save these articles in a special file on my computer and read them as a mental break when I’m bogged down in a subject.”

- It’s a good idea to invest in a system to organize your reading such as Endnote or a similar system. You can insert your own keywords about article based on your interest.
- Skim the article.
- Limit to publications less than 5 years old. Five years is the generally accepted expiration date for statistics (morbidity, mortality, etc.). Social and behavioral publications have a longer shelf life.