

Reading in the Social Sciences

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Social science research studies are almost never "read" the way you might read a novel for pleasure. They're not written for that. Instead, they are designed to be consulted, referred to. The only persons who actually read every word of a social science research report are the authors themselves. Everybody else dips into the article to extract the specific information they need.

Let Go of Your Guilt

You don't need to worry about this. You don't need to feel guilty when you say you read an article, when you haven't plodded through every word. Your job is to get just what you need from an article and spend the least possible time doing it. If you've done that, then you've officially read it. Nobody will ever think you read every word. At least they won't if they have any experience dealing with research. Everybody scans, in a purposeful manner, and nobody takes it with them to confession.

How is this possible? Social science is written in a fairly rigid structure to help people find what they need with the least work. Here's how research reports are organized:

1. *Abstract*. This is a complete summary of the study, its purposes, and main results in about 100 words. READ IT FIRST.
2. *Introduction*. This gives an overview of the key issue, problem, or question. It may also give a brief preview of what earlier research has shown about the key issue, and it may give a one- or two-sentence indication of what the current study found or expects to find and why it matters.
3. *Literature Review*. This section summarizes the state of knowledge about the key issue. First, it identifies the main fields or disciplines that have conducted research (sociology? psychology? history?) and the specialty areas where the work was done (media studies, cultural studies, etc.). With that big picture, the so-called *lit review* then walks through the main studies, citing and summarizing each one and indicating what it has contributed to the understanding of the key issue. (Usually the researchers construct this section rhetorically, to justify the particular study they are reporting. Watch for signals of the authors' intentions.)
4. *Methods*. This section explains, usually in excruciating detail, exactly what procedures the researchers followed, step by step. Sometimes adjustments must be made mid-stream, and they are reported as well. (What the researchers have written is the *methods section*, not the *methodology*. Methodology is the scholarly study of research techniques. There's a difference.)
5. *Results*. In this section, the authors report what they found. It may be broken into subsections, to deal with various aspects of the key issue. The secret to this section is to look at the data first — the tables and charts in quantitative research and the quotations or other documentation for qualitative research. Tables and quotations are easy to find and scan. STUDY THEM THIRD.
6. *Discussion*. This section explains what the results mean. It may also talk about problems that emerged or things the study left unclear (usually presented as questions the study raises). It tries to identify (and possibly justify) weaknesses in the study.
7. *Conclusion*. Authors sometimes fuse this final section with the discussion section. It contains some statements indicating why the results are important and the study worth attention. Usually the authors also make recommendations for further research, based on what they found and what questions and weaknesses remain. LOOK AT THIS SECOND.

Once you have read the abstract, looked at the conclusions, and studied the data (tables or quotations), you'll know most of what the study has to offer. You'll also know whether it deserves more attention, based on your particular needs. FOLLOW YOUR NEEDS to examine the rest of the study. If you're still trying to get an idea of the state of knowledge on the key issue, scan through the lit review. If you think the method would be useful for some project you're working on, look at that in

as much detail as necessary. Whatever you really need to know, it'll be there in roughly the order outlined here.

Don't Be Fooled

The pattern of reading I've described so far applies not only to all sorts of social science research but to the smaller pieces that make up larger studies. So, whether you're reading a single study, a series of related studies published in a journal or edited collection, or a book-length or even a multi-volume study, you can tackle the whole and most of its parts using this simple, three-step process:

Read the beginning,
Look at the ending, and
Study the bits of evidence in between.

Social scientists usually write everything to give you access to the information this way. That's why, when you read a research article or book from front to back, it seems very repetitive. First, the writer tells you what s/he is going to do, then does it, and finally tells you what s/he has just done. Nobody wants to be told the same thing three times — and nobody is trying to drag you through things three times.

Of course, authors try to vary their language enough each time to make the repetition less obvious and troubling to themselves and their editors, who must read things all the way through. But don't be fooled. This prose isn't meant to curl up with and enjoy. If you sit to read it in an easy chair, it makes the perfect sedative. You'll be asleep in no time.

The best way to read research is at your desk, with bright light and a pencil in hand poised over a notebook (legal pads work nicely). Give yourself strict time limits. Yes, time limits. A typical journal article should take 15–20 minutes, a book-length report no more than an hour (okay, maybe an hour and a half). Use an egg timer or a stop watch to keep yourself on task and avoid sinking into the morass of academic prose. Don't get sucked in.

If the research being reported is a monograph — a book-length report of research findings — then you'll find yourself flipping back and forth, referring to various sections, and making notes. Here's how it looks:

You open the book to the title page and jot down the full title, authors, and publisher. If the date isn't shown, flip over the page and get it from the copyright page.

You then examine the table of contents with great care. You spend a minute or two trying to memorize the main items — how the book is organized. How many sections? What are they for? How many chapters? What does each one accomplish? Look for the pieces from the standard boilerplate: introduction, lit review, method, results, discussion, conclusion. The chapters might have other fancy titles, but the overall structure of most books will have these somewhere. Here's a tip: sometimes the methods used are hidden away in an appendix at the end or in the preface at the beginning.

You then scan the introduction. You do this by following the same pattern: Read the first paragraph or two, flip to the end of the introductory chapter and take a look at the final paragraph or two. Then page through the chapter, looking at anything that stands out, such as tables, charts, quotations, or other evidence that's typographically distinct.

You then scan the concluding chapter. Follow the same pattern: first, last, middle. Jot down brief notes as you go. Don't dawdle. If you find that you need more detail, look at a few more paragraphs. Here again, you read the sentences of any paragraph out of order: first, last, then middle. The topic sentence in academic prose is almost always the first in the paragraph, and the conclusion is the last. Evidence comes between. This sometimes gets varied — the opening sentence might contain the topic sentence and the conclusion, or the final sentence might contain both, following a list of the evidence. Evidence is usually easy to spot because it's typographically distinct. It's either in numbers, which stand out by themselves, or it's within quotation marks and block quotations or in bibliographic citations within parentheses.

You next flip through the entire book, pausing to notice what kinds of evidence appear in which chapters. Take notes of whatever you observe, as long as it's useful to you.

You've read the entire book at that point, but you might not yet have quite enough. So, once again, you choose what to spend more time on. Be strategic, decide what you need, and look at the parts that will give it to you. As you look at any chapter, resist the urge to read long stretches of prose. Use the front-back-middle pattern to dig out the information you need. Skip the rest.

Write Only What You Need

Unless the book is your own personal copy, purchased by you — this is serious — DO NOT WRITE IN THE BOOK. This is a horrible thing to do. It's worse than not flushing in the public facilities, because it can be impossible to remove. Don't do it! There is nothing more distracting than to sit down with a book or article that has the grimy markings of some previous user. That graffiti might be useful to whoever left it behind, but it will only mislead you. What that miserable person was looking for will not be what you — upstanding, enlightened, and public-spirited scholar-in-training that you are — will want to make the focus of your attention. Do the polite thing, and (if you can't erase them) step lightly over the marks anyone left behind, without looking too carefully.

Write your own notes on your own paper. This requires that the ideas in the research pass through your mind and onto some other surface. It's harder as you do it, but it's more efficient in the long run. You'll understand the ideas and retain them in memory better because you've had to re-say what they say, in shorter form.

Any book (yes, any book) can be summarized on a single sheet from your yellow pad. Journal articles usually take a page or less. That's because, whether the study is large or small, it will have a similar structure. It takes about a page to outline that structure and take notes on the principal ideas and results. (It stings for authors to recognize it, but any social science research is reducible to one page.)

If there are particular sections or tables that you will need to study in great detail, make a photocopy. (And while you're at it, copy the title page and write the publication date, in case the copy gets separated from your notes.) You can mark these all you like, of course, but be sure to do the note-taking first.

You can write notes on paper or on a laptop computer, or even on a personal digital assistant. The temptation with these handy devices is to run long. Whatever device you use, just be sure to give yourself a limit that's roughly equivalent to a single page of handwriting.

One final thing about notes: If you ever copy out the words of an author, use quotation marks and record the exact page(s), table number(s), and third-party source(s). Renowned scholars in the past decade have fallen into disrepute by failing to do this simple thing. Later they forgot which words were theirs and which they copied, they got caught and sued, and they had to pay to destroy entire press runs of their newly minted volume. Most plagiarism isn't intentional, it's sloppy. But the consequence is the same.

If you limit yourself to a single page of notes, and perhaps some photocopies, you will have caught the essence of the study. You'll be able to talk about it confidently based on your notes. You'll know just what you need to know and have easy access to it.

Most of all, you won't spend endless hours in the library, fighting off drowsiness and boredom, with little to show for it. Just remember: a social science research study is not a novel.

Final Caveats

None of the above really works very well for reading things like philosophy, history, or the humanities, which have structures and organizational devices present but often less transparent. Most of my suggestions are meant to help the beginning scholar cope with the flow of research studies — found in newsletters and bulletins, journals and proceedings, monographs and books — from the present while at least making a dent in the accumulated works from past social science.

Nothing here is meant to dismiss the need for careful reading that allows time to absorb and ponder good scholarship. Deep thinking and writing can be present in the social sciences, and some articles and books hold up under and even encourage rereading — Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* comes to mind.

One result of adopting these scanning techniques is that a reader can exercise judgment and sort the dross from the really good work, and then spend time with it. No amount of task-centered focus can get me through a work of William James without descending into the prose — he's just too fascinating and readable, and I don't want to miss it.