

How to Reduce Your Reading Load

This may be the first time that many of you need to read research reports. Being able to read these reports effectively and efficiently is a learned skill. Research reports are not like a lot of other literature, including “think pieces,” opinion pieces, literature reviews and the like. I hope that this guide will help you learn to use research reports effectively, to read them quickly and to be able to extract the key points from them effectively. You **do not** need to read everything you find that seems “interesting.” If you try to do that, you will quickly become overwhelmed. **NONE** of us can read it all. You need a systematic way to decide **what’s worth reading**. I recommend that you use a three-step procedure to decide whether to put the article in one of three categories: (1) must read, (2) maybe read later, or (3) not going to read.

Step 1: Consult the Abstract

Read the abstract first. A good abstract is a comprehensive summary of the major components of the report. Check out the **Abstract Evaluation Form** at the course web site. If you can’t check “4” or “5” in every box on that form, you probably should move on to another article. Weaknesses in the abstract usually reflect weaknesses in the article. This course requires that you rely primarily on articles that report **original research**. Be wary of articles when the abstract seems to focus largely on “recommendations.” This is a sign that the article is for a practitioner or general audience rather than advanced professionals. I immediately assign most articles to one of my three categories based on the abstract alone.

The Abstract Evaluation Form is for original research articles – and it won’t help you decide whether to keep other kinds of articles or not. It’s not good for making decisions about research reviews or literature reviews, for example. Opinion pieces, research reviews, literature reviews and such are useful in this course and more generally in your professional work – but they are not a substitute for research reports. Keep the good ones and use them, but do not rely exclusively on them. Reading what someone says a researcher discovered is **not** the same as reading the researcher’s original research report.

Step 2: Check Out the Body of the Article Quickly

Once you have decided to examine an article in more detail, based on the information in the abstract, a quick perusal will help you decide if you want to read it in detail or not. Here are some things to examine.

- Check the length. Simply put, short (3-4 page articles) are unlikely to contain the detailed information you need.
- Look at the introduction to the article (usually labeled such, but sometimes not). This is where the author will usually describe the theoretical framework for the research, if there is one. The introduction is usually substantive in research reports that discuss theory-based research. The author needs to explain the theoretical framework for the work and the specific constructs under study. The introduction normally constitutes a literature review as well. You will see several references to previous research, often including references to key conceptual or theoretical pieces produced in the past by the same or other authors. If the article has few references in the introduction, the introduction is very short, or the introduction focuses almost exclusively on application, the article probably is not what you want.
- If you’re encouraged by what you see in the introduction, move immediately to the “Discussion” or “Results and Discussion” section of the article. See if the authors really

came up with new and interesting findings and conclusions. If you get to the discussion and it's not new to you. You've already read three or four reports that make the same points, it's probably not worth your time to read this article right now. Set it aside – maybe to read later.

Step 3: Get Down to Details

If the article has passed all of these “tests,” look at the procedures or **methodology section**. Reports of original research almost always have a detailed methodological section. It may be called “methods,” “methodology,” “procedures,” “methodological approach,” or by other similar phrases. You want an article where this section is well developed.

If the methodology looks sound, examine the way the data were analyzed. You are looking for detail and sophistication. Many valuable reports of original research use sophisticated analytic procedures, but some original research does not rely on statistical analysis so absence of statistical analyses alone is not a “bad” thing. You are looking for articles where the authors explain in detail (1) how they analyzed the data and (2) what their findings were. If you start to see simple graphs of percentages and such, or highly summarized findings, you probably do not have the kind of article you want.

A Special Pile

In addition to my three main “piles” of articles, I keep a group called “valuable references.” Always look at the references, even if you've decided not to put the article in your “got to read this” pile, because you can use the references to find additional relevant articles. This will usually be much more time efficient than conducting many searches of the library databases. For example, if you are trying to find an article with a good discussion of the theoretical framework for research, do **NOT** reject an article just because the article itself does not contain an extensive theoretical discussion. Look at the references. You may need to consult one or more of the articles in the references to learn about the theoretical framework for the research reported in the article. Many, if not most, authors assume that the reader of a research journal is familiar with the theoretical frameworks used in a field of study and many simply site ground-breaking research reports or research reviews rather than consume valuable space in the research report. Similarly, some author report various aspects of a large research project in several articles. One article may not contain the detailed discussion of the methodology that you want because the authors may have published this in another article about the research. They will refer to that article in the references and tell you where to find the detailed methodological discussion. Start with the most recent publications and follow the trail back through time with the references.