How to Read an Academic Article

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Scholars write academic articles to share their ideas with their peers, usually within their own academic discipline (e.g., physics, literature, psychology). Because they already share a highly specialized background, they often assume that their readers already understand some of the fundamental knowledge of the field as well as the jargon, which is the "the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group," according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Students typically do not yet share the specialized knowledge or the jargon. The way they learn these things is the same way the scholars themselves did: they expose themselves to it and struggle with it over time. Your teachers have selected readings that they feel will challenge you to grow intellectually. They usually do not choose readings that they think you will easily comprehend. If the readings were easy, you would not need to be in college to work on them! You therefore are normal and justified in your feelings of frustration or intimidation when you encounter a seemingly difficult or arcane text. The good news is that you are reading the article in a class that will help you grapple with it. Your teacher and your fellow students are working on it with you in a collaborative environment. For the exercise to be most fruitful, though, students must do their best to understand the article as much as possible, so when they convene in class, they can contribute to the discussion.

To help you get the most out of a scholarly article, Dr. Becky Rosenberg, former Director of the UWB Teaching and Learning Center and former Director of the UWB Writing Center, has written the following guide to approaching a scholarly text. Use this guide each time you read an academic text until it becomes second nature.

I. Find the Claim:

One of the keys to finding your way through the specialized and often dense texts produced by scholars is remembering that somewhere early in the text the writer needs to tell the reader how his or her study contributes something original to the scholarship on the subject. It may be a correction of some past misunderstanding; it may be the inclusion of some consideration or variable that previous researchers have missed; it may be applying a theory or concept in a new way or in a place it has not previously been used. Make it your first goal to find that claim. Once you know that claim, you will be better able to understand the author’s choices, and better able to evaluate the effectiveness of the argument.

Another key is that academic language is subtle, understated. Scholars rarely exhort readers adamantly to reject the lousy scholarship of those who came before and see the brilliance of their fresh new positions. You therefore need to be very attentive to small rhetorical signs like "but" and "although."

While close reading for these subtle rhetorical roadmaps, use the following questions to guide you in
locating the claim:

1. What question does the author pose? This typically is implied rather than stated explicitly, so you might be searching for something that is not literally in the text.

2. Thesis/position/argument/claim
   - What is the primary argument made by the author?
   - Where do you first find the argument?
   - What language indicates to you that this is the primary argument?

3. Context
   - Why is the argument significant?
   - What other positions does the author indicate are debated regarding the topic?
   - When was the article written? Where was it published? Who was the intended audience?

II. Assess the strength/validity of the argument:

Again, you will need to use close reading skills to uncover the nuances of the argument and to evaluate its effectiveness in making its claims and engaging with other positions. For example, notice how the writer introduces evidence in support of his or her claim. Does the writer simply say, "Many literary scholars have argued unconvincingly that Hester Prynne's return to Salem in the end of The Scarlet Letter attests to Hawthorne's anti-feminist attitude toward women artists"? Or does the writer engage the theses of specific literary scholars who, no doubt, have their own nuanced readings? In some cases, the argument that gives attention to the complexity of a few other arguments (rather than generically referencing "many scholars" or "studies that show") can produce the more complex and subtle claims. Then again, sometimes writers must generalize in order to distinguish themselves more broadly from others. If they get too hung up on subtle points of differentiation between their arguments and those of others, the significance of their claims may get lost in the trees. Be aware of the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of either approach, depending upon the scope of the argument.

While continuing to close read for the subtle rhetorical ways in which the writer builds his or her case, use the following questions to help you sort out the building blocks of the writer's argument:

1. Evidence
   - What evidence does the author offer in support of the position put forth? (Identify all pieces of evidence you find.)
   - What is the nature of each piece of supporting evidence? For example, is it based on empirical research, ethical consideration, common knowledge, anecdote?
   - How convincing is the evidence? For example, does the research design adequately address the question posed (#1 above)? Are the ethical considerations adequately explored and assessed? Have you read or heard anything on this subject that confirms or challenges the evidence?

2. Counter arguments
   - What arguments made in opposition to the author's views were described?
   - Were these arguments persuasively refuted?
   - What evidence was used in the refutation?

3. Effectiveness
   - What were the strengths of the article?
Mastering academic reading takes time and practice. We have faith in your ability to improve your academic reading skills throughout your undergraduate career, as we are always improving our own. Please be patient with yourself (and with our own imperfect scholarly prose). With perseverance and hard work, you will hone your skills and will learn more and more. Another benefit of improving your critical reading skills is that they will help you become a better writer. Go for it!

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