



Reading for Research Purposes

When undertaking research, one usually ends up downloading about fifty different journal articles, checking out a few books from the library, and getting stuck with at least thirty different tabs open on your browser, all the while wondering where to begin. Over time, the dread of exploring this tangled mess grows as the tabs multiply, books are reissued without you being able to make any headway, and the journal articles keep increasing in volume.

This handout aims to resolve exactly this issue by showing you how you can begin to cut down the number of these unread articles, sort through your data, and distinguish between relevant and irrelevant data.

Recognizing your Goal/s

The first thing you need to do is to clearly understand what it is you want to do. All the tabs that you opened, books that you issued, and articles that you downloaded, did not happen in a vacuum. Maybe you wanted to accumulate as many sources as possible related and that's fine as the starting goal. But now, our goal is to make this process more finite. The bibliography of a typical undergraduate research paper should have no more than six journal articles and references to two books (regardless of whether you cite the whole book or certain sections from it). As such, try to aim for six journal articles and work with them first before adding more on your plate.

Once this is done, we shall set a concrete goal to deal with the material that you have gathered so far. We will make our plan such that we will read one journal article per day, one book within a week, and explore one tap per day. By setting these concrete goals, we will be able to sift through all the sources that we have gathered so far so as to produce data that will be useful to us.



Reading Techniques

Following are a few techniques you can use to read more quickly as well as to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant data.

Skimming

The purpose of skimming is to get a general idea of the text. For example, if you are reading a book then it's good practice to go through the table of contents, headings and/or subheadings, and any highlighted passages if there are any. Remember, the point is not to memorize or annotate the text. You are simply going through it to understand its relevance to you. If you are reading through a journal article with an abstract, then make sure to read the abstract; it will give you an overview of what the paper is about. This does not mean, though, that you should skip out on checking the headings and/or subheadings within the paper.

Thereafter, you need to determine whether the journal article is relevant for your research or not. How will you do this? You will a) ask yourself, is this article related to the broad theme/s of my paper? b) does the article use a methodology (for example, visual analysis) that you are interested in using in your own paper? c) are the conclusions of the article something that you can expand upon, provide contradicting evidence for, or use to support your own argument? If the answer to all three questions is yes, then this article is definitely relevant for you.

Scanning

The purpose of scanning is to locate precise information, such as specific keywords, within a text. If you are using an electronic copy that is searchable then scanning is easy as you simply need to press "ctrl+F" to open the search dialogue box, type the key term within it, and that specific word will be highlighted throughout the text.

If you are using a book then at the end an "index" will be given where a certain keyword, for example "Akbar", will be written and then page numbers will be given to indicate all the instances the name "Akbar" is used within the book. In case of journal articles, you will first skim through the text looking for the specific word and then simply highlight it. Then come back to those pages where you highlighted the word to read in detail what is being said about it. This will allow you to decide whether you need to keep this particular source, or discard it.

Mapping

The purpose of mapping is to aid in memorization, strengthen recall, and to make explicit the connections between various key terms between various readings.

Mapping is a useful technique to determine the relationship between key terms as you write about each one of them individually and then, quite literally, draw the connections between each term (much like a detective's murder board!).

For example, let's say you are writing a paper on the subversive potential of graphic novels. You find one research article written by Licona (2005) that identifies the following key terms: *(b)orderlands' rhetorics, coalitional consciousness, decolonial imaginary, politics of articulation, third space, reverso, and zines*.

Now, you make a reverse brain-storming cloud where you place your own argument and/or question in the middle and then place the key terms around it. Once you have placed all of the key terms, start making connections among them. For example, write out what connection *third space* might have with *coalitional consciousness*, or *politics of articulation* with *zines*. Not every key term will be relevant to your specific question and/or argument, so make bold and big the ideas that you find relevant and cross out the others.

Next when you pick your second article to skim and scan through, ensure that you look out for these specific ideas that you have already highlighted. In fact, in searching for your next article you can input a few of these key terms to further refine your search result in order to turn up relevant content.

Do note that the terms you identify in the first article may not be immutable or fundamental to your research question and/or statement. As you read on and make connections with other concepts, it just might happen that a concept in your third article turns out to be more important than a concept you found in the first one. And, that's alright. Remember that mapping allows you to identify key terms, draw connections between them, and then, having determined the relevance of each term to your argument and/or question, use them to further refine your search options. As such, just like any keen-sighted detective, you should be willing to change your (murder) board as and when new and relevant information comes up.



Questioning

Questioning is an essential technique to be used when reading for research purposes because it allows you to actively engage with the text by looking for loopholes and flaws in the argument. For example, when you read something like, “Today we consider Shakespeare’s plays as part of the English canon and worthy of being included as foundational texts in all English Literature curricula because of its qualities that allow it to be a classic”, it would be best for us to pause here and ask: what are these qualities? Does the writer name them? If yes, then are there other plays which also have these qualities but are not considered classic? Why is that?

Additionally, questioning is a powerful tool because you might just find out that certain writings are considered to be ‘canon’ or ‘classic’ not only because of their writing style, but also factors, such as political relevance of the work, ethnicity and social status of the author, the preferences of the people who actually gather works that form the canon, and so on. So, you see, questioning allows you to develop your own voice, mark any passages whose meaning you do not understand, and determine avenues for possible future research.

Conclusion

Within this article we have provided you with a few techniques to avoid amassing too much reading material without making any progress on it. So, remember, we start by setting ourselves a concrete goal to follow in terms of the number of readings that we will do. Setting a concrete goal like this, especially with timelines, allows us to be organized and finish our work in a timely manner. For example, we collect a total of 12 journal articles and decide to determine whether an article is worth keeping or not by skimming and scanning three articles per day. Thus, we know that it will take us about four days to determine which articles to keep and which ones to throw away, we can effectively budget our time for reading the articles in depth and for writing the paper.

As for the techniques themselves (skimming, scanning, mapping, questioning) please do follow them in order in which they have been listed. Firstly, skimming will allow you to get a general idea of the text to determine the relevancy of the journal article for your research. Then scanning you will locate and underscore specific keywords within a text as related to your research, thus further solidifying your reasons for keeping a particular text. Thirdly, mapping will now make use of the key terms, as identified through scanning, to



make explicit the connections between the various key terms. This will allow you to determine the relevance of each term to your argument and/or question, use them to further refine your search options. Lastly, after having fully committed to reading a particular article, use questioning because it allows us to actively engage with the text and determine the merits and demerits of an argument.