

## Reading Scholarly Articles: Joining the Conversation

Reading scholarly articles can be challenging. Because they are usually written for academics in a specific discipline rather than for a general audience, academic texts often use jargon and assume prior knowledge. But scholarly writing is usually not as difficult as it first seems. While you may not understand everything in an academic source, you can learn to recognize major “road signs” and thereby to find your way. Use these strategies to help you read and use scholarly materials effectively. You may find that many academic texts offer meaningful ways to explore your and others’ ideas and perspectives.

### General Tips

- **Reading academic texts is social.** Talk with professors and peers to help you understand readings, clarify questions, share interpretations, and identify a text’s potential significance to you and others.
- **Read rhetorically.** This means thinking about the audience, author, and purpose of a text. It also involves considering the text’s relevance to you.
  - What is the author’s motivation and agenda?
  - What is your own motivation and agenda for reading the text?
  - If your professor assigned the reading, what is her/his reason for this?
  - Does the writing style, tone, or form of the text suggest anything about purpose or perspective? (Consider not only *what* the text says, but also *how* it says it.)

### Rhetorical Reading Strategies

#### 1. **Audience:** To whom is the writer speaking?

Academic texts are often written for other academics in a given discipline, rather than for a general audience.

- **Publication:** Where was the source published? Who typically reads this publication?
  - Look at the publication title.
  - Look at the source’s citation format or the structure of the publication. A scholarly journal for academics usually has a volume number and an issue number.
  - Still not sure? Talk with a reference librarian, your instructor, or classmates.
- **Prior knowledge:** If you are not the writer’s intended audience, remember that the author will assume prior knowledge you may not have. Don’t worry about understanding everything. During your first reading simply try to get an overview of what’s being said.

#### 2. **Purpose:** Keep in mind your purpose. Though you may not be the intended audience, there is a reason you are working with this text. If the reading was assigned and you’re unsure why, review your course syllabus or assignments, or talk with your professor.

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Based on Karen Rosenberg’s “Reading Games: Strategies for Reading Scholarly Sources.” *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 2*. Eds. Chales Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky. Parlor Press, 2011.

<http://www.parlorpress.com/pdf/rosenberg--reading-games.pdf>

(Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 2, is a collection of Creative Commons licensed essays.)

3. **Overview of the article structure:** Begin by looking for the central idea and main points, rather than by reading the text from start to finish. Study the “architecture of the article” by looking at these parts:
  - a. **Title:** Communicates the central topic.  
Many academic titles are long and have two parts separated by a colon. The part before the colon is a teaser intended to peak interest; the second part clarifies what the text’s main focus.
  - b. **Abstract:** Summarizes the text and usually appears at the beginning of an article. (Also often included in library database citations.)  
Not all academic texts have abstracts, but those that do provide a concise description of the text’s main points. An abstract often includes the main problem or question, the authors’ approach to the problem, and the new idea or contribution the article makes to the field. Because an abstract often is very dense and may include jargon and assume prior knowledge, don’t be discouraged if you find it confusing. Re-read and highlight key ideas and try to get a general understanding of the article’s focus.
  - c. **Introduction:** Summarizes the text and the main idea, communicates why we should care, and provides a “road map” to the text.  
Introductions are helpful for orienting yourself to the text.
  - d. **Section headings:** Serves as a title for a specific part of an article.  
After reading the introduction, read all section headings before reading the content in each section.
  - e. **Conclusion:** Recaps on what was said and expands on its significance.  
The conclusion can help you make sure you understood the introduction. It may also include limitations of the authors’ work, unanswered questions, and future possibilities for research.
4. **Main argument:** Identify the main argument or idea of the text.  
After examining the title, introduction, section headings, and conclusion, identify the main argument or idea of the text will help you read it effectively and efficiently. Then you can determine how much energy to give to different parts of the text.  
  
The abstract and introduction usually outline the central point. It might necessarily be stated in a single sentence. Try stating the main point in your own words in order to ensure your understanding and to identify the text’s relevance to your purpose.
5. **Relevance to your purpose:** When you have a general understanding of the text’s different parts and of the main argument, think about what relevance the article has to your own purpose. How might you use ideas from the text to “enter the conversation” about the topic or questions at hand.
6. **Remember reading is social.** Discuss the text and its ideas with peers and your professor. Share and compare your understandings and interpretations. Consider what value the text offers to you and others in relation to your own interests and perspectives.