



# How to read an academic paper

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## What's the idea?

While reading academic papers can feel like hard work, there are a few basic techniques that can make it much easier.

## What does it mean?

When reading an academic paper it helps to try and answer these five questions (and always keep them in mind):

- 1 Why am I reading this?
- 2 What are the authors trying to achieve?
- 3 What are the authors' conclusions and how are they relevant to my work?
- 4 How convincing are the author's conclusions, and why?
- 5 What use can I make of this?  
(Wallace and Wray, 2016)

## What are the implications for teachers?

Rather than reading the paper from start to finish, we suggest you look

at the different sections and decide whether you want to read on.

» **Read the title.** Do you have a good idea of what the paper is about, or is it unclear?

» **Read the abstract.** This should tell you in more detail what the paper is about, what method was used and what the findings were. This is great for giving you an overall sense of the research.

You may decide reading the article is not a good use of your time at this point, but if you decide to carry on, use the following steps:

» **Read the introduction.** Is it clear what the article is about and does it outline its central ideas? Is this helpful for you?

» **Skim the sub-headings.** What topics are covered? Are these what you need?

» **Read the conclusion.** Are these relevant to you and your work?

By this stage you should have a pretty good sense of what the article covers and whether it can help you. Next,

you need to find out more about the methods, findings and limitations of the research:

» **Read the findings and the data or results.** What do the authors assume about the prior knowledge of the reader?

» **Read the method.** How many participants? How was the study carried out? Is the method suitable for the aims of the research?

» **Do the researchers discuss the limitations of the study?** If so, what are they? If not, you might find our compact guide on common limitations helpful.

Having done that, you might want to look at further research to get a sense of the field and cross-check findings. Read the literature review and reference list, and follow up with any other sources that are relevant to your interests. If you are familiar with the field, you may read the reference list first, so that you can see where the authors have positioned themselves in the wider field.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- » Booth WC, Colob GG, Williams JM, Bizup J and Fitzgerald WT (2016) *The Craft of Research* (4th ed). Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.
- » Thomson P (2018) For the reader – citations, reference lists, tables of contents and indexes. Available at: <https://patthomson.net/2018/04/16/for-the-reader-citations-foot-notes-reference-lists-and-indexes/> (accessed 14 February 2019).
- » Wallace M and Wray A (2016) *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates* (3rd ed). London: SAGE.