

Reverse Reading a Scholarly Article

We all feel like we know how to read, but we rarely think critically about how we do it, or why. This exercise is one of several that we will use to break down the process of reading a scholarly article. In this example, we'll be outlining the article to extract key information.

In scientific writing, scholarly articles are very explicit about their structure. In the humanities (literature, history, art history, anthropology (sometimes), philosophy, etc.), in contrast, we tend to keep our structures secret. That means that as readers of humanistic texts, we have to think back from the article in order to deduce:

- The argument
- The areas of study, previous work, and contributions
- The methodology
- The data
- The results

Your job in this exercise is to extract the above information from the article you're reading, using the worksheet on the second page.

If you feel that you already know how to do this, take advantage of this opportunity to think critically about academic writing as a genre. Why do you think we write the way we do? Who does it serve? Who is disadvantaged by it? What assumptions does it make about knowledge and authority?

Worksheet

Step 1: Context

Before you begin, find out the author's *institutional affiliation*, *job title*, and *department*.

Step 2: Outline

Write down every heading or subheading in the article, creating an outline of the piece as it is defined by the author.

Step 3: Summarize

Under each heading, summarize in one or two sentences what you think this section is doing. What's the main point of the section? Is it making an argument? Conducting a literature review? Offering an example or case study?

Step 4: Extract Information

Answer the following questions:

- What is the main problem the article is seeking to address, or main question the article is seeking to answer?
- What is the main argument of the article?
- What fields is the article participating in (i.e. Book History, Latin American Studies, English literature, etc.)?
- What methodology is the article using? For example: analyzing the materiality of a book, researching in archives, close reading a primary text, theorizing based on secondary sources.
- What is the data or subject that the article is addressing? I.e. "Three editions of the US constitution"; "All newspapers printed in Haiti in the 1800s";

Step 5: Analyze

Pick one quote that you agree with and read it closely. What is convincing about this quote? Why do you agree with it? What strategies does the author use to prove their argument?

Step 6: Question

After reading the article, is there anything that feels either unconvincing or that you want to learn more about? What is it?

Sample Reverse reading

Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Introduction," in Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter Mignolo, *Writing Without Words* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). 3-26.

Author: Professor of art history at Tulane University.

Outline:

- **[no title]**
Summary: arguing that we have to think more broadly about what writing is and what it can be
- **Limited Notions of Writing**
Summary: surveys different ideas that people have had about writing, especially in the New World. Shows that most people think too narrowly about writing, probably because of racist ideas from the nineteenth century.
- **An Inclusive Definition of Writing**
Uses the concept of glottographic and semasiographic systems to broaden our definitions of writing to every inscription that communicates meaning, either inside or outside of language.
- **Writing Systems in Pre-Columbian America**
Applies the concept of glottographic and semasiographic systems to the case of Pre-Columbian America.

Extract Information

What is the main problem the article is seeking to address, or main question the article is seeking to answer?

- Come up with a definition of writing that can include the ways that pre-columbian americans communicated.

What is the main argument of the article?

- That semasiographic and glottographic writing can help us to understand what writing is. Semasiographic is meaning-making but not tied to language, while glottographic is the representation of language.

What fields is the article participating in (i.e. Book History, Latin American Studies, English literature, etc.)?

- Pre-Columbian History, Linguistics, Art History, maybe archaeology?

What methodology is the article using? For example: analyzing the materiality of a book, researching in archives, close reading a primary text, theorizing based on secondary sources.

- Analyzing pre-Columbian codices

- Reading secondary sources on linguistics, literary theory.

What is the data or subject that the article is addressing? I.e. “Three editions of the US constitution”; “All newspapers printed in Haiti in the 1800s”;

- Mesoamerican codices, including Aztec pictorials and Maya hieroglyphics. Also Andean quipu.

Analyze

“The notion that spoken language is the only system that allows humans to convey any and all thought fails to consider the full range of human experience.”

The examples that Boone gives, like mathematical notation, make it clear that we communicate without using words, and that even written communication isn’t always based on words. The example of mathematical notation also shows that we value some kinds of written communication more highly than others, and it’s not surprising that this is based on race. It seems important to be able to value these other forms but I can’t read them. Do I need to be able to read these systems in order to value them? How does this impact me as a researcher who mostly works with alphabetic texts?

Further questions

- Does it matter that I can’t read any of these semasiographic texts?
- Does it matter that in my research I almost only study alphabetic documents?
- Where is the line between semasiographic writing and, for example, ‘art’?