

“How to Read an Academic Paper” Schema

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Most academic journal articles and books, if well written, have the following components. In order to make sense of the readings, it can be helpful to pull out the main pieces while you are reading. Book chapters may be less clear because they are part of a larger whole, but do your best to understand the main arguments, evidence, and conclusions of a piece you are reading. This will likely be helpful for you in all future academic study.

- 1) **What is the Research Question?** What is the central question, the main “puzzle” the paper is attempting to explore and answer? What is the main argument or goal of the paper?

- 2) **What is the audience?** Usually an academic paper identifies a specific discipline, a group of scholars, or body of existing scholarship, i.e. genocide prevention studies, history, transitional justice, anthropology, law and societies. Sometimes the audience is also policy makers.

- 3) **What is the methodology being utilized?** Is it qualitative or quantitative, or mixed methods? Are they interpretivist or positivist? Interviews? Participant observation? Surveys? Archival analysis? Or statistical analysis? Why were these methods chosen (if you can tell)?

- 4) **What is the evidence?** What kind of data are collected? Is there a case study? Are several cases being compared? What evidence is collected and how does it relate to the central question and main argument of the paper?

- 5) **What are the results and conclusion?** What do the evidence and data say? What is the answer to the research question? In what way does the evidence solve the puzzle? Are there unanswered questions or surprising results?