

READING AND WRITING IN COLLEGE

Ten years of tip sheets in one handy document

Note to readers

This is a collection of practices. They may not be the best practices, but they are mine. What works for you might be different, and it might change over time. I only articulated this stuff for myself after a lot of trial and error (and procrastination, and all-nighters, and TBH a couple of near-dropout experiences in graduate school). My goal here is to share some of the things I do when I read and write academic papers, in case students need a place to start as they develop their own processes. My goal is to make this easier for you than it was for me, but I don't think my way is the best or only way.

Throughout, you'll find links to various resources. These are [underlined](#) and should be clickable.

Please drop me a line if some part of this document is particularly helpful (or particularly unhelpful): aah92@drexel.edu.

–Amelia

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Ten Steps to a Literature Review

Fun fact: many of the “research papers” you will be assigned in college are actually literature reviews, in the sense that they ask you to read and analyze scholarly work but do not involve collecting original data, examining primary sources, conducting original data analysis, etc. Here is one way to write a literature review, based on a literature review paper of about 3,000 words that I typically assign to first-year students. Note that, if you are “deadline-motivated” you can do this in two days instead of two weeks BUT I REALLY REALLY DO NOT RECOMMEND IT.

1. Find a topic (1-3 hours, at least 2 weeks before target date)
 - a. What’s going on in the world that (a) fits the parameters of the assignment and (b) interests you? Make a list.
 - b. Talk to your professor! They should be able to tell you more about what’s been written on these topics, including (maybe) some more specific areas of research to check out or candidate research questions.
2. Do some skimming (2-4 hours, 10-13 days out)
 - a. Armed with the info from step 1, search for scholarly articles on that topic. See **Finding and Storing Scholarly Sources**, below, for more on this.
 - b. Skim the abstracts of articles that look potentially relevant. As you’re doing this, use a reference manager to pull in every article that still seems potentially relevant after reading the abstract. I like Zotero for this purpose.
 - c. You now have some sort of idea of the types of research question (RQ) in your general topic area.
3. Frame your research question (1-2 hours, 10-13 days out)
 - a. Working with the information from step 2, write down 3-5 specific RQ’s related to your topic. Some common “genres” of RQ’s include:
 - Why do some countries _____, while other countries don’t?
 - Why do some countries have high levels of _____, while others have low levels?
 - Does _____ cause _____?
 - What causes _____?
 - What factors are most important in explaining _____?
 - b. Send these candidate research questions to AHG. She’ll let you know whether you’re on the right track and perhaps offer refinement.
 - c. Choose one question to focus on.
4. Do more reading (8-10 hours, 7-12 days out)
 - a. Look at your reference manager and flag all the articles that are relevant to your RQ.
 - b. Read these articles, using the **How to Read** document if you like, AND TAKE NOTES. Please take notes. You’ll be so much happier!
 - c. Follow the references! When an article references another text that seems relevant, look that one up too. Notice when multiple articles reference the same text.
 - d. Look up the articles you find using references in other articles.
 - e. Rinse and repeat, but don’t drive yourself crazy. Set a time limit on reading.

5. Find a thesis (1-2 hours, 5-10 days out)
 - a. Stop reading. You have to stop reading and start writing eventually! This is important.
 - b. Gather your notes and your thoughts.
 - c. Consider (maybe even jot down your thoughts about) the following:
 - What do these articles seem to agree about?
 - What do these articles disagree about? (Bonus points if you have an idea about why they disagree.)
 - What kinds of research methods do the authors use, and are research methods associated with disagreements?
 - What cases are most commonly considered? Is case selection associated with disagreements?
 - d. Write down several potential thesis statements that your reading would support. Common “genres” of thesis statements include (but are not limited to):
 - Because of its focus on [some particular country, type of country, or region], this literature misunderstands [the concept of interest].
 - The literature on [the concept of interest] is plagued by [methodological problem].
 - The debate about [the concept or question of interest] remains unresolved primarily due to differences in the definition of [the concept of interest].
 - The debate about [the concept or question of interest] remains unresolved primarily due to differences in research methods used to study [the concept of interest].
 - The scholarly literature about [research question or concept of interest] doesn't help real-world decision-makers.
 - We know [concept 1] and [concept 2] are related, but we don't really understand how.
 - To really understand [the concept of interest], we need to integrate findings from [2-4 related areas].

6. Outline (1-2 hours, 4-6 days out)
 - a. Write down your thesis statement at the top.
 - b. Consider what main ideas or themes support that statement. The sections of your literature review are: Introduction, 2-4 main ideas or themes, Conclusion (or Discussion).
 - c. For each section, note what texts you'll be referencing and how they fit together.
 - d. Fill in outline details: sub-sections, paragraphs, etc.

7. Shitty First Draft (4-8 hours, 3-4 days out) (definitely read the linked article; it's short)
 - a. Open your outline document.
 - b. Fill it with text.
 - Write fast and sloppy. I like to break my writing into “chunks” of 300-500 words and treat them as totally separate mini writing assignments during this phase.
 - Write with only minimal notes, if you can. When I know something is true but I can't remember which text I saw it in, I use {CITATION NEEDED} or [CITE] in the text. Later, when I'm editing, I can go back and replace those with the correct citations. During the Shitty First Draft phase, you're just trying to braindump as fast as you can.
 - Make sure you're NOT copying text from any articles directly into your draft, unless you specifically plan to offer a direct quote. It's easy to lose track of copy-pastes and accidentally plagiarize.

8. Edit #1: Structure (2-4 hours, 2-3 days out)
 - a. Read the whole document from beginning to end. Does its order make sense?
 - b. Do the middle sections do what the intro said they would? If not, make changes to the content of the intro, the sections, or both.
 - c. Is the relationship between each section and the broader argument clear? If not, make changes so that the reader can tell why each section is there.
 - d. If you haven't already, make sure the paper tells researchers what they should do next.
 - e. Fill in your missing citations by searching your document for {CITATION NEEDED} and then combing your notes for the correct cite.

9. Edit #2: Style (2-4 hours, 1-2 days out)
 - a. See **General Writing Tips** below, and edit accordingly.
 - b. Make sure citations are complete and correctly formatted, both in the text and in the references. See **Citation Practices**, below, for more on this.
 - c. Read, or have someone else read, for clarity and style.
 - d. Make suggested clarity and style edits.
 - e. Final proofread.

10. VICTORY.

Finding and Storing Scholarly Sources

Before you start searching, get yourself a reference manager (aka citation manager). This is a piece of software that both stores your information and can create an auto-formatted bibliography or references section. I like Zotero, because (1) it's free and non-profit and (2) it has a great Chrome plug-in so that, as I'm looking at articles online, I can just click and all the article information (plus, in most cases, a .pdf of the article!) gets slurped into my Zotero database.

Zotero can be found (and downloaded!) at <https://www.zotero.org/>. There are also links to Chrome and other plug-ins there.

It does a LOT, but I mostly use it for creating bibliographies. For me it's the best way to navigate when I'm trying to narrow down which articles are the most relevant to my research question. After you've downloaded Zotero (or EndNote or whatever) and gotten the browser plug-in, you're ready to actually search for articles.

At this point, I have a confession to make: I used to encourage undergraduates to use Google Scholar, because that's what I use day-to-day. I don't do that any more, because Google Scholar sweeps up a lot of crap with the useful stuff. So, unless you're *extremely* confident in your ability to identify scholarly sources, consider starting with one or more of these databases (links via the Drexel library):

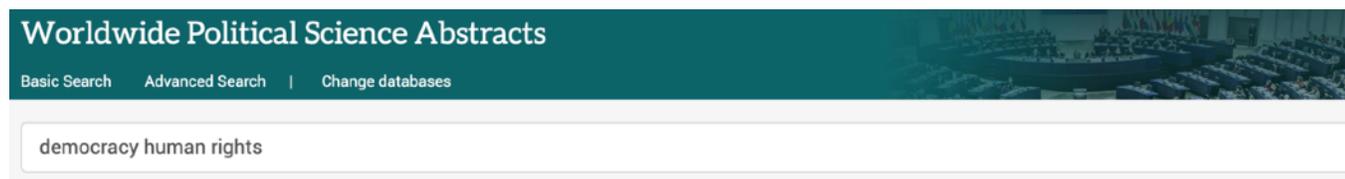
[Worldwide Political Science Abstracts](#)

[JSTOR](#)

[ProQuest One Academic](#)

[Web of Science](#)

You could start with any of these, although I think WPSA is probably the simplest. Begin searching with your "best guess" search terms. If, for example, I'm looking for information on my research question "Do democratic states engage in lower levels of human rights abuses?" I might start with...



...but that produces over 45,000 results. Oops. So I narrow down, using the filter options in the left sidebar. I make sure the "Peer reviewed" check box is always checked, and narrow it down to only Scholarly Journals, only items published in 2000 or later, only items in English, and so on. But, oops, I'm only down to 39,000 articles. Still too many. So I try the following search terms:

democracy "human rights"

democracy authoritarianism "human rights"

"regime type" "human rights"

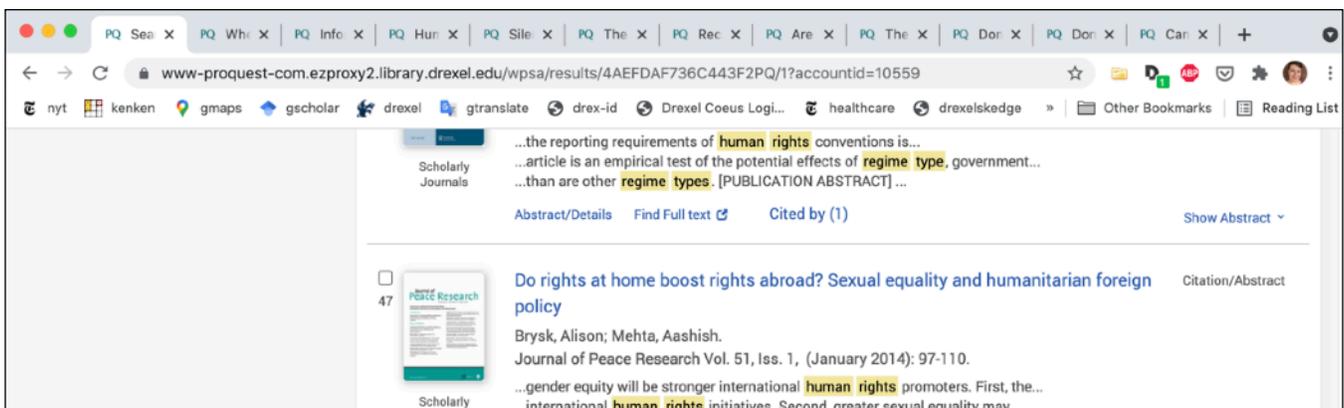
"regime type" torture

"regime type" "civil liberties"

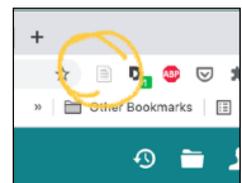
Notice the quotation marks in these search terms! Quotation marks mean “this phrase has to go together.” By contrast, searching without quotation marks is asking for all documents in which the words *this*, *phrase*, *has*, *to*, *go*, and *together*, appear anywhere, in any order.

Make sure to experiment with search terms that are similar but not identical to your initial ones. For example, when I searched “democracy ‘human rights’”, I found a lot of articles arguing that democracy is or should be a human right. That’s a solid position, but not super relevant to my research question, so I tried including democracy AND authoritarianism. Then I realized I could just say “regime type.” I also experimented with searching for some specific human rights indicators, rather than simply searching for “human rights.”

For each search, as you see potentially relevant articles, open them in separate tabs (for me that’s control-click; for you I don’t know). I usually keep browsing my search results and opening tabs until I have around 10 tabs open, and/or until I hit the end of a page of results. Here’s a screen shot of my browser after a round of this (note that I’ve scrolled to the bottom of the first page of WPSA results, opening everything that looked relevant):



Next, quickly glance through all your open tabs. Scan each abstract to see if the article is actually relevant. If it is, pull the citation into Zotero by clicking the “paper” icon, shown at right. Zotero will often download full text if it is available; if not, make sure to save a copy of the article. Irrelevant articles get their tabs closed (satisfying!).



Repeat the search, open tabs, check tabs process until you’re satisfied. You may strike gold right away and have your whole list of articles in thirty minutes – but probably not. You might have to change search terms many times before you find what you’re looking for. You might have to try a different search engine. If, after about an hour of searching, you still don’t have much that seems directly relevant to your research question, write me an email telling me about your research question and what search terms you’ve already tried. I can probably help.

Note that you might not have access to every article you find via WPSA; that’s fine; you don’t have to chase down every reference. But, if you think an article is really relevant and you can’t get a copy, let me know.

How to Read

This is a basic how-to, with apologies to Timothy Burke at Swarthmore College, who gives an [excellent general introduction to reading in college](#). Compared to Burke's "How to Read in College" (which, if you're smart, you'll read alongside this document), what you're reading now is more specific. It is specific to Political Science; more than that, it is specific to empirical political science (not political theory), and it focuses on single articles or chapters (not whole books).

Before getting into the nuts and bolts, it's important to point out that—unless you have a photographic memory—you probably won't gain much by reading academic work once, straight through. Some of this stuff is complicated and important. Other stuff is neither complicated nor important. So it doesn't work to read as if every sentence has equal importance.

In addition: As they say on the internet¹, your mileage may vary. The approach I describe here might not work for you at all. If so, keep trying. You've got to have a system for academic reading if you're going to survive college, but it doesn't have to be this one. Whatever your system is, it will probably involve "skimming," but skimming might mean lots of different things. As Burke writes, "[S]kimming is not just reading in a hurry, or reading sloppily, or reading the last line and the first line. It's actually a disciplined activity in its own right. A good skimmer has a systematic technique for finding the most information in the least amount of time." Your personal systematic technique might not match mine. Whatever technique you end up with is going to feel awkward and unrewarding and slo-o- o-ow at first. Sorry, I guess?

Your technique will include skimming, but skimming will not be the only thing you do. I hope. Here's what I do when I'm reading an article.

1. *Title, Headings, Abstract*

First things first: what is this article about? If there's an abstract (not an introduction, an abstract; do you know the difference?) read it carefully. Whether or not there is an abstract, you should also page through the article and write down the title, the section headings, and any sub-section headings. Voila! You have an outline. Some articles will have none of this stuff (which is super annoying), but you should always look. Why? Because it helps you focus on the right stuff. The title, headings and abstract provide a map (shopping list?) for future exploration of the article. You want to identify the main question or debate, get a sense of the themes of each section, and build a list of words or phrases that you don't understand. If there's a phrase in the title or a section heading that you don't understand when you start reading, make sure you do understand by the time you finish step 4.

2. *Skim for Signposts*

OK, you've been through the article once and you know the main parts of the article, and you're on the lookout for unfamiliar terms or concepts from the headings. You're also on the lookout for "signpost" words and phrases like those below. These aren't foolproof – signposts don't necessarily

¹ Well, they did ten years ago.

signal importance; important material doesn't always show up with a signpost – but it's worth looking. When you find them, mark them. I usually just circle, but if you're into highlighting (whether physical or digital), go nuts.

Category	Signposts	Why it matters
Key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “puzzle”/“puzzling” • “central question” • Watch out for clumps of questions beginning with “why” or “how” 	Helps you keep your eye on the main question(s) the author is trying to answer. Often will be framed as a “puzzle” even if the answer to the question seems obvious. Fun!
Lit review/ context/ counter- argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for long strings of parenthetical citations • “some scholars” • “critics”/“critical reader(s)” • “may object” • “in contrast” • “[other author] argues...” • “whereas” 	These phrases signpost 2 things: (1) the debate or debates that the author is participating in; and (2) potential counterarguments to the author's claims. The literature review should help you figure out what's still debated in this research area (and also occasionally who hates whom).
Causal theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “accounts for” • “explains” • “causes” • Sometimes you'll see a diagram of the proposed causal mechanism 	Often in political science, there is a causal question (does X cause Y? If not, what does?) and an answer that relies on a causal theory (X causes Y in the following way: ...)
Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “assume” / “assumption” • “taken for granted that” • “stylized fact” • “conventional wisdom” 	These can identify either the author's own assumptions as they approach their research, or the assumptions that the author believes that other scholars have made.
Summary/ Restatement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “in other words” • “i.e.,” • “that is” • “in short” • “in brief” • “fundamentally” 	This is gold. Often a single paragraph will tell you “in brief” what the whole argument of the paper is. How helpful! Often occurs in introduction and/or conclusion.
Conclusions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “conclude[s] that...” • “I/we determine” • “Ultimately,...” 	Sort of like a summary or restatement, except focused on the finding of the study rather than the theory behind the finding.
Lists, emphasis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “first,” “second,” “third,” etc. • boldface • <i>italic</i> 	Useful! Sometimes lists only tell the reader what will be in each section of the paper. Other times, a list indicates a particularly pointed critique. But always know what a list or emphasis is about.

The stuff in the table isn't meant to be an exhaustive list. But it will help guide you to the most important bits of the story. Especially in qualitative political science research, you may get lost in the rich descriptive detail unless you learn to look for signposts. If you find yourself getting bogged down, don't be afraid to literally draw a line through paragraphs that are all detail. You will know

them because they (usually) contain very few of the key words listed above. You can also draw a line through "side notes" and other digressions. (What's a digression? It's something that's not necessary to get the gist of the section. It may be very important to a close read, but it's probably not worth focusing on unless you're reading this article in order to provide a detailed review.)

3. *Read Strategically*

OK, now you've been through the article twice: Once really briefly, to map it out via the title, headings and abstract; once less briefly (but still pretty briefly!), to mark key words and eliminate unnecessary stuff. Now you're going to actually read. Keeping in mind the overarching map/themes/goals from your first trip through the paper, read the whole paper, skipping only the paragraphs you literally drew lines through. Don't give equal attention to all paragraphs, though. Read more slowly and carefully where there are thick concentrations of signposts; read as quickly as you can elsewhere. For each paragraph, try writing 1-3 words in the margin (or wherever you're taking notes) to describe it. If you're working in hard copy or on a touch screen, you may also want to use a series of symbols. I use a check mark for "good point;" a question mark for "huh? what are you talking about?" and an asterisk (*) for THIS IS IMPORTANT.

4. *Review*

After you've finished reading, try to identify:

- new terms or concepts and their definitions
- the main question(s) the article tries to answer
- the main argument(s) of the article
- the evidence used in the article
- the author's stated and unstated assumptions

Be able to say what's valuable about the article. But also, be critical. What evidence is missing? Is there other evidence that the author is ignoring? Does the argument make sense? What would have made the article more convincing? And so on. Congratulations! You are now finished reading this article.

Final Notes

Again: your mileage may vary. Depending on the amount of time available, you may only get to read the very most important paragraphs. You may not get to review at all. But at the very least, signposting will give you some ideas about where those important paragraphs are.

Lastly, as a colleague said to me once, "This is not a novel. There should not be a cliffhanger. No one is trying to hide anything." Political science is not known for the beauty of its prose. (Sorry.) But neither is it known for extreme complexity or obfuscation. Usually the author will say to you, quite literally, at some point: HERE IS WHAT I AM DOING. Don't overthink it; Lord knows we're not.

Citation Practices

Citations serve two purposes: (1) giving credit where credit is due, and (2) providing evidence about claims. Often a citation serves both these purposes at once.

In political science, citations are nearly always given via a combination of in-text, parenthetical citations and a Works Cited (or References or Bibliography; I don't care) page with more complete citations.

Many of your professors will care a LOT about citation formatting. Personally, while I use the American Political Science Review format, my students may use any format that doesn't rely on endnotes. Endnotes are terrible. There is obviously a lot more to say about proper citation practices, but there are many fine handbooks for that. These are my bottom-line basics.

1. Cite as generously and completely as possible. *Never assert something that isn't common knowledge without a citation; never use someone else's words or ideas without citation.*
 - a. Not sure whether it's common knowledge in political science? Check with me.
 - b. If you can't find the right citation for the thing you want to say, or you want to emphasize that the common knowledge is incorrect, you might refer to it as a "conventional wisdom." For example, "Conventional wisdom holds that poor people are less politically active."
 - c. It's better to over-cite than under-cite.
2. Always tell the reader *at least* the author's name and the year of publication (Hoover Green 2021). If it's a direct quote or a specific claim, you will also need the page number (Hoover Green 2021: 10).
3. Don't waste words describing the author and their work. This is common in news sources, where the author needs to telegraph an expert's stature, but is almost never done in scholarly work.
 - BAD: Amelia Hoover Green, a professor at Drexel University, writes in her book *The Commander's Dilemma* that "blah blah blah" (2018: 101).
 - GOOD: Hoover Green (2018: 101) argues that "blah blah blah."
4. One exception to the above rule is when we are considering the words of pop-culture or partisan "experts" whose takes have not been peer-reviewed. If you're not sure whether the source you're looking at is from one of these "experts," let me know. You can also throw in a snotty "see, e.g." ("see, for example") in this situation.
 - BAD: There is a broad scientific consensus that the moon is made of delicious cheese (Hoover Green 2021).
 - GOOD: Researchers whose work is supported by the lunar cheese industry, such as Amelia Hoover Green of the Mooncheddar Group, maintain that the moon is made of delicious cheese (Hoover Green 2021).
5. Parenthetical citations go outside the quotation marks but inside the sentence punctuation.
 - BAD: X is always Y (Hoover Green).
 - STILL BAD: X is always Y (Hoover Green 2018).
 - GOOD: X is always Y (Hoover Green 2018: 101).
 - ALSO GOOD: Hoover Green (2018) claims that X is always Y (at 101).
 - ALSO ALSO GOOD: According to Hoover Green (2018), X is always Y (p. 101).

General Writing Tips

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1. Be a mimic! The way we learn to write in an academic voice is to read well-written examples, not only for substance but for style. I really like the short (very short!) book They Say, I Say for understanding the rhythms of academic arguments.
2. Avoid sweeping claims. When you're talking about why an issue matters, ditch "Since the beginning of time..." and "Across the world," and "Throughout history..." Instead, start with a specific, compelling example: "On August 25, 2021, in Kabul, Afghanistan..." When discussing evidence, remember that in social science we almost never "prove" anything. Rather, "the evidence suggests that..."
3. Avoid passive voice. Not "It was shown that X leads to Y," but "The authors show that X leads to Y." Not "Y is caused by X," but "X causes Y." Don't worry about this in a first draft, but try to weed out passive-voice sentences, where possible, during editing.
4. Use the first person. This helps you avoid passive voice. So not "It is argued that _____," but rather "I argue that _____." Some disciplines avoid first person, but political science is not one of them.
5. Double check for common mistakes that a spell checker won't catch. These include (but, sadly, are not limited to):
 - your/you're
 - its/it's
 - they're/there/their
 - Usually, the word you are looking for in political science is causal, as in "of or pertaining to causation" not casual, as in "jeans and a t-shirt."
 - Reading a bunch of related articles and books, and then critically assessing them, is a "literature review" as in "a review of the [scholarly] literature," NOT a "literacy review" or a "literary review."
6. Avoid too-long sentences. Simplicity aids clarity.
7. Avoid repetition. An exception to this general rule is when you're giving multiple restatements of a difficult concept or definition. If you do this, though, make sure you're actually adding to the reader's understanding.
8. Use the first person in your academic writing! This helps you avoid passive voice. So not "It is argued that _____," but rather "I argue that _____." Some disciplines avoid first person, but political science is not one of them.