

Reading and Note-taking for Early Research

Here are simple reading and note-taking strategies for the early stages of research.

In the early stages we use two basic reading strategies: Search and Skim.

At the beginning of the research process our goal is simple: to select sources that help us answer our research questions.

Imagine our topic is the gender wage gap in Canada.

Our key research questions are: What are the causes of this problem?

Who is most affected?

What are some solutions that would help?

But when searching the web or library databases, search results for this topic can be very long.

How do we decide which sources are best?

Step 1: Skim the Results List

Before clicking on any source, we skim the results looking for key words on our topic.

This helps us make good guesses about which ones to examine more closely.

Step 2: Search the Source for Structure and Content

Once we find a source that looks promising, we can start to search the structure for clues about the content.

First, search for clues in title pages, abstracts, table of contents, headings, and subheadings.

Are there keywords related to our topic?

Do the headers and sub-headers relate to our research questions?

Next, look to see when it was published.

Is it peer-reviewed?

Does it have a reference list?

Finally, search out the authors.

Are they experts?

Searching through sources like this will help us decide: Is this useful for your research?

Step 3: Skim the source for “Hot Spots”.

Once we’ve determined a source is credible and helps us answer research questions, skim key sections (or “hot spots”) like abstract or summaries, introductions, and conclusions.

When we skim, we read quickly to gain some background knowledge on our topic and to get a sense of the author’s position.

The first and last sentences of paragraphs and sections usually contain the key ideas.

Don’t forget to skim reference lists to find other sources that answer your research questions.

Even at the early stages of research, you should be taking notes to keep track of your sources and how you want to use them.

Here are 3 tips for note-taking in the early stages of research.

1: Organize Your Sources

If you’re using the Library, add the item to your favourites or email it to yourself.

On the internet, book mark the URL or make a Pinterest board.

If your source is available in PDF, download it into a folder on your desktop.

Whatever system you choose, keep all research organized in one place.

2: Keep Track of Citation Information

Things like the title, the authors' name, date of publication—anything you need to cite it properly later.

3: Make a Few Annotations

When you're searching and skimming your sources, annotate to create concise reminders of what you've learned about the text so far.

Make note of questions this source will help you answer.

Any first impressions: What is the main idea?

What is author's perspective?

Using these reading and note-taking strategies in the early stages of research will make the process that much easier as you move into the later stages.