

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

Lessons on the Craft of Scholarly Reading

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AUGUST 5, 2018



Scholarly reading is a craft — one that academics are expected to figure out on our own. After all, it's just reading. We all know how to do that, right?

Yes and no. Scholarly reading remains an obscure, self-taught process of assembling, absorbing, and strategically deploying the writing of others.

Digital technology has transformed the research process, making it faster and easier to find sources and to record and retrieve information. Like it or not, we've moved beyond card catalogs, stacks of annotated books and articles, and piles of 3x5 cards. What hasn't changed, however, is the basic way we go about reading scholarly work.

In graduate school, we are told to “do the reading” and “know the literature,” in order to understand our field and master a particular corner of it. We do our best to absorb key sources and orient ourselves to the discipline so that we can demonstrate our mastery in preliminary exams, dissertation proposals, and literature reviews. Throughout our academic careers, that remains our mandate: Find the relevant literature, make sense of it, and then use it in our own scholarly work. But how, exactly?

Rookie scholars and established ones alike could benefit from a clearer, more detailed understanding of how to read *effectively*. For me, the craft of scholarly reading proceeds in three phases, each with goals and pitfalls.

Phase No. 1: Gathering. To create a project bibliography, we need to define our chosen scholarly landscape. Where are its borders? What are its key features? Where are the controversies in our topic area? We also need to understand how the current topic landscape came into being: Which thinkers, ideas, debates, and divisions gave rise to these particular borders, features, and controversies?

To “know the literature” is to find ways to become part of it. In this phase we read to figure out how the history of our subject area has shaped its current geography, both in general and in relation to our own particular concerns.

This can be an exciting phase of discovery. Gathering sources should feel like a treasure hunt. You’re not doing deep reading at this point. You’re pursuing keyword searches and combing through bibliographies for clues to follow and trails to trace. During this phase we are trying only to determine the lay of the land — skimming and organizing the scholarly books and articles and the names of scholars we find, into categories we can use later.

The goal: to create an evolving and open-ended assemblage of sources — a working bibliography.

Phase No. 2: Engaging. Once we’ve gathered our main sources, it is time to interact with them closely and thoughtfully. That is the mark of a true scholar. Choose from your broad bibliography the specific books and articles that offer you the most interesting, surprising, disquieting, puzzling information. You’re seeking material that deals with your emerging research questions, so this is no time to skim. You’re not looking only for information that confirms your preconceptions, but also for the stuff that doesn’t. To be a serious scholar, you must always be open to the new or different, seeking to understand and do justice to relevant sources across a variety of perspectives.

Your goal in this phase is to read, highlight, and annotate only the sources most relevant to your focus. You are trying to figure out what was (or is) at stake in the scholarship of others, so that you can accurately represent and engage these elements in your own work.

This is when you can also start informal, responsive writing. I recommend doing quick synopses as you read — writing down concerns and questions, putting your own ideas

into your own words. That way you actually will have begun writing in ways that support and shape your later work.

Engaged, responsive reading helps you find and hone your own point of view in immediate response to that of other scholars.

Phase No. 3: Deploying. Now you must figure out how to incorporate key elements of the literature into your own writing. Find ways — digitally or on paper — to identify and retrieve crucial quotes, ideas, and points of view. You want to make the insights of others available for your own future readers, as well as to demonstrate how your work connects with the work of other scholars in your subfield and discipline.

Ideally, academic reading moves smoothly through those three phases, guiding and motivating you into productive academic writing. But in practice, there is plenty that can hamper you in the reading process. Here are some reading pitfalls:

- Beware of the impulse to start writing overly detailed outlines during the gathering phase. Doing so may decrease your anxiety and help you feel “scholarly.” But copious notes at this phase will keep you focused on trees when you should be getting a sense of the forest. Remember: Not all of the sources you’ve gathered deserve the same level of reading attention. First skim to grasp your research area’s history and geography, then read closely and annotate only the sources most relevant to your research questions.
- In the engagement phase, return to original sources whenever possible. Guard against the temptation to rely mostly on secondary sources, or to take sides based on your training or on current trends. In your reading, try to understand what predecessors in your area have actually said by tracking down original sources. Do not succumb to the temptation to distort, then demolish, the claims of selected others. You are contributing to a conversation, not taking sides or mowing down the competition. Show respect for those you cite by doing all you can to represent them accurately.

- In the deployment phase, avoid “cut and paste” scholarship, in which you assemble a jumble of quotes and paraphrases, hoping that a conglomeration of citations will substitute for analysis. It won’t. The possibilities you identify in this final phase of reading need to be judiciously used in the service of your own perspective. Your job is not to prove that you read all the relevant literature by quoting from it as much as possible. Instead, your job is to select relevant elements of the literature to anchor your own contributions.
- Remember that each of the three phases of “reading the literature” can turn into a form of writing avoidance. Don’t keep gathering, engaging, and annotating in the hope that your diligence will magically coalesce into scholarly writing. Watch out for those moments when you are starting to spin your wheels, superstitiously hoping that preparation will turn into writing through some form of alchemy. I describe warning signs of this in [“The Myth of One More Source.”](#) As I say there, the point of a literature review is to learn from the literature, not to drown in it.

Finally, let me offer you one more piece of reading advice: Take on only those research projects that let you read lots of interesting sources! One of the privileges of being a scholar is the chance to gather, engage, and extend the insights of others. Why make yourself slog through sources that bore you? Choose a project that lets you read what truly interests you.

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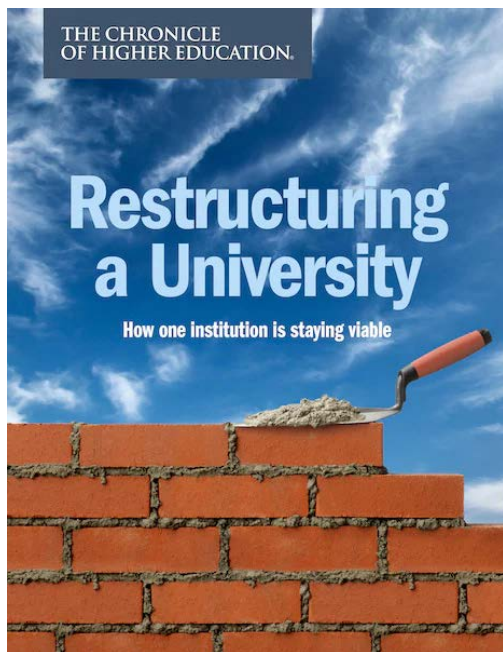
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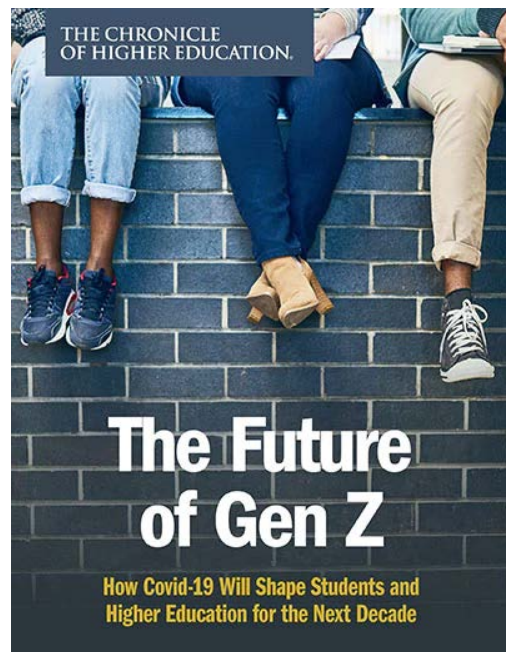
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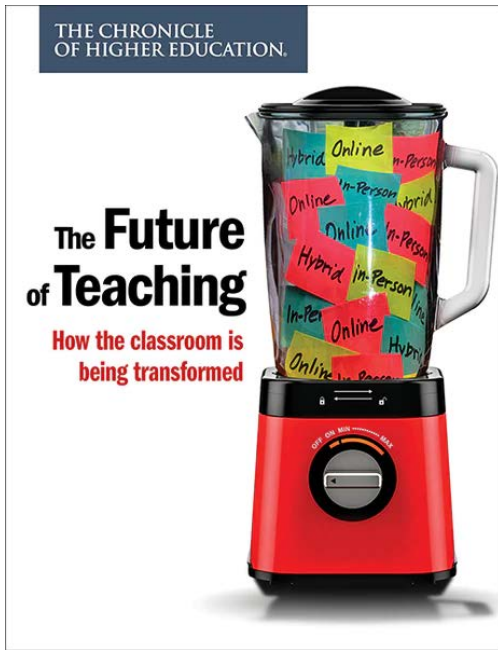
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