

Tips on Reading Difficult Material

To understand how strong information is, and how to incorporate it into your own opinions and decisions, we have to go to the source: Who originally discovered, measured, said, described this information? We need to go to the primary source.

Reading original research papers is not easy. Even experts in their exact field will not understand everything about them the first time through.

What we expect from you, and know you can do: Do your best to understand what you are reading, and notice the parts you don't understand.

- 1. Read the title.**
Can you more or less understand it and it seems on target for the question you are trying to answer? Good! If the title is incomprehensible, choose another paper.
- 2. Read the abstract.**
Check that you can repeat back the point of the study and their main result.
- 3. Read all the subheadings.**
Now you know where the authors are going to take you, what kind of story they are telling.
Typical research paper subheadings: Abstract, Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, References.
- 4. Look at the figures.**
How do they connect with the abstract and the headings? Do they show how the authors reached their conclusions?
- 5. Read the conclusions.**
Check that you can repeat back the main conclusions.
- 6. Skim all the sections, and then read a second time in more detail.**
You won't understand all of it, but make sure you recognize which parts don't yet make sense. Know what you know, and what you don't yet.