

Taking Notes on Academic Papers

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Opening:

Keeping up with the current literature in your field can feel like trying to drink from a firehose—completely unrealistic. But here’s the secret: you don’t need to read every word of every paper.

My advisor used to tell me:

- One hour per book
- Thirty minutes per academic paper

This guide breaks down how to efficiently read and take notes in order to build your understanding of the literature in your field. PS—a lot of what you need to know is often in the abstract (which is why writing a good abstract for your own papers is so important).

Anna Baidar’s 45-Minute Note-Taking Method

If you are outlining an empirical paper, follow the guidance in [“Empirical Paper Summary Guide Graham S22.”](#) If you are outlining [a theoretical paper](#), follow that (simpler) guide. Keep the relevant guide open as you read—this will help you learn the structure of academic papers. Eventually, you’ll internalize this and no longer need the guide at all.

One of my former students, Anna Baidar, would use this method:

First 30 Minutes

1. Set a timer for 30 minutes
2. Read the **abstract**, **introduction**, **conclusion**, and **methods**.
 - a. To do well in this class, you need to *deeply understand the methods of each paper*. I will beat you over the head with a club until you do.
3. Answer **these four essential questions**:
 - a. What is the **puzzle** in this paper?
 - b. What is the **question** being asked?
 - c. What are the **methods** used?
 - d. What are the **results**?

Final 15 Minutes

1. The first timer should be done. Set another timer for 15 minutes.
2. Now, answer the **most important** questions from the notes guide:
 - a. What makes this paper good—or great?
 - b. What is the most important counterargument, weakness, or hole in the theory?
 - c. What paper comes next in this research agenda?

These aren't just busywork—they're the foundation of your own research ideas.

- The things you *love* in a paper? Carry them into your own work.
- The things you *hate*? That's your opportunity to improve the literature.
- Maybe the next paper in this research agenda will be *your* paper.

Pro Tip: Keep a running notebook of potential paper ideas. Every time you think, “Huh, that’s interesting,” write it down. That’s how your research portfolio begins.

If you have time left, go back and read the rest of the paper to fill in any gaps. Example reading summaries can also be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Total time: ~45 minutes

Why Write Good Notes?

You're required to submit notes on two papers a week. If everyone writes good notes, by the end of the semester you'll have comprehensive summaries of about 70 foundational and cutting-edge papers in the field of IPE.

That archive will be invaluable—whether you're studying for your qualifying exams or combing through the literature for your own research.

Caveat

These are meant to be guidelines, not hard-and-fast rules. It's okay to take longer than 45 minutes—especially in the beginning.

Reading the literature is hard at first. That's normal. It's not intuitive. The notes guide helps you build a structure so that, over time, you can analyze papers quickly and efficiently—without relying on the guide forever.

Empirical Notes Guide:

Takeaway (1 sentence):

How does this paper change how we understand the world?

Puzzle (1 sentence):

What is the question the paper seeks to answer?

Theory (1–4 bullet points):

- What is the **cause** (IV)?
- What is the **effect** (DV)?
- What are the **core assumptions**?
Core assumptions often involve:
 - Who are the actors in this theory?
 - What are their capabilities?
 - What do they want?
 - What institutions constrain their behavior?

Research Design (1–4 bullet points):

Describe the study's design.

Results:

Summarize the main empirical findings.

What makes this paper good or great?

- Is the question, theory, data, or method new?
- Is it a clever piece of arbitrage (e.g., borrowing tools from one literature to answer questions in another)?
- For older papers: What is the enduring theoretical or empirical contribution?

Counterarguments or Weaknesses:

What's the biggest limitation or hole in this theory?

Next Paper:

What's the logical next step in this research agenda?