JESSICA CALARCO (/)
INTRO (/)
RESEARCH (/RESEARCH)
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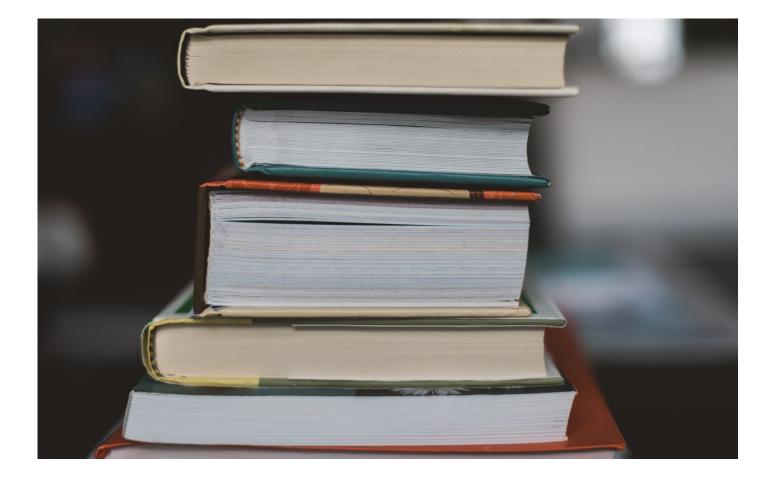# Beyond the Abstract: Reading for Meaning in Academia

Jessica Calarco (/tips-tricks?author=55b27525e4b0af791775d79c) · September 2, 2018 (/tips-tricks/2018/9/2/beyond-the-abstract-reading-for-meaning-in-academia)

My first year of grad school, I found myself totally overwhelmed by the amount and density of the required (and recommended) readings. I spent hours slogging through all of it. I had piles of notes. But I felt lost.

So now, in the interest of revealing the #HiddenCurriculum of higher education, I share these tips with students:

First, read as much of each article/book as it takes to identify:

- the central research question
- the data/methods used to answer the research question
- the central argument/answer
- the key patterns that support the central argument/answer
- the evidence that points to those larger patterns (e.g., statistical correlations, examples from fieldnotes or interview transcripts, etc.)
- the limitations (i.e., what questions it doesn't answer; what perspectives or possibilities it doesn't consider)
- how you'd cite the article/book/chapter in your own work (i.e., some research shows that X; some studies use method Y,; authors have debated the best way to conceptualize Z, etc.)

Second, figure out how each reading relates to other things you've read, especially other things by the same author or in the same subfield/genre. Does this particular study:

- support, explain, clarify, extend, or challenge what's been said before?
- develop a new theoretical model?
- use a new method?

- add a new case/population?

Third, identify which books, articles, or chapters you'll need to read in full. Those include readings that speak directly to your research interests and the projects you're planning to complete. With those readings, you should be able to clearly articulate how your work builds on, is informed by, and is different from what's been done before.

Fourth, choose a citation manager (essentially a digital tool that allows you to keep track of the articles you read and also cite those articles more easily in your writing). There are lots of different tools out there. Zotero, Mendeley, EndNote, etc. I haven't found one that's perfect, but there are a bunch of free options, so I'd suggest starting there and trying to find one you like. Once you choose a citation manager, put *everything* you read into it. Use it to take notes. Use the tag features to group readings by subfield and method and argument. It'll make your life (and your research) *way* easier down the line.

Fifth, and finally, remember that the #HiddenCurriculum of academia makes it easy to feel like a slacker (https://twitter.com/Juliebird5000/status/1036025150725074944) for even considering not reading it all. But that "feeling like a slacker" thing is exactly how the #HiddenCurriculum produces impostor syndrome. No scholar can read (or has read) everything. Certainly not in full.

But the solution isn't just to skim haphazardly or skip half the readings on the syllabus or quit reading entirely. The solution is to approach reading like research--with a set of questions to answer and clear set of strategies to use in doing so.

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Shobha 9 months ago · 0 Likes

Love this post! One of my colleagues shared your info with me, and I'm so glad she did! I did want to know if you have any particular citation manager that you have settled on in your career. I fielded the question about citation managers on Twitter after having read your post. I use RefWorks for my thesis/dissertation research and Zotero for another research project I'm working on with other people (love being able to share a library with others). I would love to know if you've grown to find one of these citation manager tools better than the others. Thanks!

Graham 10 months ago · 0 Likes

I only just found your blog because somebody else shared this post on twitter. Good stuff. I find that I read articles without being able, most of the time, to distill what has been written using the sort of framework you have provided. I'm doing my research in

the loose discipline of regulation though - which means many articles are written by legal scholars (I am not a legal scholar). The issue I find with legal scholarship is there usually is not a research question and not a method. It becomes hard to pick out the material using this framework. I guess that means I have to look up tips on extracting material from legal scholarship?

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