

How to Read an Impact Evaluation Paper

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1. INTRODUCTION

Policy makers and researchers must read papers for several reasons: to write a policy memo that makes a recommendation to address a specific problem, review them for a conference or a class, or to keep current in their field. A typical policy maker/advisor will be expected to make evidence-based recommendations in a short amount of time.

Learning to efficiently read a paper is a critical but rarely taught skill. Beginning graduate students, therefore, must learn on their own using trial and error. Students waste much effort in the process and are frequently driven to frustration.

For many years I have used a simple approach to efficiently read papers. This paper describes the “grid” approach and its quickly processing papers to get the main points.

2. THE GRID APPROACH

The key idea is that you should read the paper in two steps with the goal to fill a grid with some key points, instead of starting at the beginning and plowing your way to the end. Each step accomplishes specific goals and builds upon the previous step: The *first* step gives you a general idea about the paper. The *second* stem lets you grasp the paper’s main results and assumptions.

2.1 The grid

You should start out with a grid, either printed or on a text-editor. Your main goal is to complete this grid, and in doing so, to understand the research paper you are reading. Below, you can find the grid:

Research Question	
Data/Context	
Main Results	i.e.: The intervention increased had an effect of X units in outcome Y.
Method	i.e.: Randomized control trial, descriptive data, regression discontinuity, etc.
Assumptions	i.e.: There are no spillovers within a school/household

2.2 The first step

The first step is a quick scan to get a bird’s-eye view of the paper. You can also decide whether you need to do any more steps. This step should take about five to ten minutes and consists of the following steps:

1. Carefully read the title, abstract, and introduction
2. Read the section and sub-section headings, but ignore everything else
3. Read the introduction (development economics papers usually summarize all aspects of the paper in the introduction). A basic structure of a development economics paper can be found in the Appendix. Not all papers follow this structure, but it is good guidance on what you should expect to find an introduction (even if in a different order).

At the end of the first step, you should be able to answer the *four Cs +R*:

1. *Category*: What type of paper is this? An impact evaluation using a randomized control trial? A descriptive paper? A paper using quasi-experimental data to evaluate the effectiveness of an educational policy?
2. *Research question*: What question are the researchers trying to answer? What is the educational problem the intervention tried to address?
3. *Context*: Where is the paper set geographically? What are the main characteristics of the population that was studied?
4. *Correctness*: Do the assumptions appear to be valid? How can the context affect the interpretation of results?
5. *Contributions*: What are the paper's main contributions?

2.3 The second step

In the second step, read the paper with greater care, but ignore details such as proofs. It helps to jot down the key points, or to make comments in the margins, as you read.

1. Skim the paper to look for the **main results** of the paper. In one or two lines, what is the answer to the research question according to the authors? Here, it can be helpful to carefully at the figures, diagrams and other illustrations in the paper: they usually summarize the main points. As for tables, they are usually designed to stand alone, so the title will give you an idea of the main point and the notes will describe all the steps and assumptions made to get the results.
2. Remember to mark or highlight the **assumptions** as you go through. This will allow you to critically analyze the generalizability of the papers' conclusions.

You should be able to fill out the grid now! Some papers will be harder to read than others, especially if they do not follow the question-methods-results-value added structure.

Nevertheless, knowing what you are looking for is the first step.

Sometimes, papers use more than one method to answer one question or they try to answer many questions. In these cases, my recommendation is to choose what question is most interesting/what methods are more robust and easier to understand and stick to that.

3. A REQUEST

I would like to keep on improving this document. Please send an email or a direct message through twitter (twitter.com/lapumi) with any suggestions for improvement.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document was adapted from S. Keshav's "How to Read a Paper" (Keshav, n.d.), with the goal to teach masters students how to quickly read and process evidence from applied economics papers.

5. REFERENCES

Evans, D. (2020, February 10). How to Write the Introduction of Your Development Economics Paper. *Comentary and Analysis*. cgdev.org/blog/how-write-introduction-your-development-economics-paper

Keshav, S. (n.d.). *How to Read a Paper*.

<https://web.stanford.edu/class/ee384m/Handouts/HowtoReadPaper.pdf>

6. APPENDIX

Development Economics Paper Introduction (Evans, 2020)

1. Motivate with a puzzle or a problem (1–2 paragraphs)
2. Clearly state your research question (1 paragraph)
3. Empirical approach (1 paragraph)
4. Detailed results (3–4 paragraphs)
5. Value-added relative to related literature (1–3 paragraphs)
6. Optional paragraphs: robustness checks, policy relevance, limitations
7. Roadmap (1 paragraph)