**HOW TO READ A SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE**

When students in the sciences are first faced with using the primary research literature, the prospect sometimes seems overwhelming. The *worst way* to assimilate a research paper is to read it word for word, title to literature cited, as if it were a textbook. This approach is a waste of time.

Before reading one word of an article, ask yourself: What am I looking for in this article? Knowing what I do about the subject, what gaps need to be filled, what knowledge needs to be expanded, and what controversial points need to be corroborated? Generate expectations of a journal article before you read it. This will help your analysis of the work in front of you, plus keep you more interested in the material.

Read the authors' names. Where and with whom are they working? What is their expertise? Names may mean little at first, but as you "wade through" a scientific subject or topic you will find familiar names cropping up, and you will develop those with whom you agree and those whom you question.

Read and digest the title. It should summarize the work of the article well, help you to clarify your expectations of the paper, and it should be an attention-getter (if you are reading the article, it has probably already accomplished that task!).

Read the abstract carefully and try to understand it (though it may be the densest prose you will ever encounter). Abstracts are as difficult to read as they are to write, because an entire publication must be summarized in an understandable way in only about 200 words. By now, you should have a good idea of what the paper is about and what you have gotten yourself into.

Picture time--flip through the article and study the figures, illustrations, and tables, including the legends. It will probably become necessary to consult the Methods and Results section to clarify figures and understand the experimental design. If the article is closely related to your research, closely examine the techniques described in the Methods section. There may be problems there, but more likely there will be a new, perhaps better, approach to your own research. It should be clear to you by now whether this paper will be truly helpful. If so, now it is time to be critical (please, see the note below about this word).