

# Critically reading scientific papers

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The following are guidelines to effectively read a scientific paper.

(1) Summarize briefly what the authors claim. See also point (3).

Read the title and abstract. Summarize the claims in your own words or paste in the key sentences as a citation if they are very clear to you, for reference.

The authors argue that leaf metabolomes - the complete set of chemical compounds in leaves - reveal ecological strategies that traditional plant traits cannot capture. By analyzing metabolite profiles of over 700 tropical and temperate species, they identify “five metabolic functional traits” that together form “two major axes of variation”. One linked to “chemical defense” and the other one linked to “leaf longevity”. These axes are largely independent of classical trait frameworks, showing that metabolite data add “new hidden dimensions” to understand plant form and function.

(2) What are the authors’ hypotheses (or questions), tests (or ways they attempt to answer the questions), and conclusions? Are these supported? See also point (3).

Read the last paragraph of the introduction; methods & results; first & last paragraphs of the discussion.

➔ Pay special attention to **figures** and **tables**, both in the **main** and in the **supplementary**! Are these clear? Does their organization make sense to you? What is the take-home message of each one?

## Hypotheses

The authors propose that leaf metabolomes may reveal functional dimensions of plant biology that classical traits (like leaf area, SLA, height, etc.) cannot. They ask whether metabolite chemistry can be summarized into a small number of “metabolic functional traits,” whether species vary along major metabolic axes, and whether these axes are independent from classical life-history traits.

## Tests

They measured leaf metabolomes of >700 tropical and temperate species using LC-MS. From 21 chemical properties of metabolites, they identified five representative metabolic traits. They then used PCA to find major axes of species-level metabolic variation and compared these with classical trait datasets to test for independence.

## Conclusion

They found two consistent axes of metabolic specialization: one linked to chemical defense, and one linked to leaf longevity/structural investment. These axes are independent of classical plant traits, meaning metabolite profiles reveal “hidden” dimensions of plant function. Their figures clearly support this: clustering of chemical properties (Fig. 1), metabolic PCA structure (Fig. 3), and low correlations with classical traits (Fig. 4).

The figures and tables in the paper are generally clear and logically organized.

Figure 1 shows that the 21 metabolite properties cluster into five groups, supporting the choice of five metabolic traits. Figure 2 demonstrates that different metabolite families occupy distinct regions of chemical space, confirming that the selected traits capture meaningful biochemical differences. Figure 3 presents the species-level PCA and reveals two major axes of metabolic specialization (defense vs.

longevity). Figure 4 shows weak correlations between metabolic traits and classical plant traits, supporting the claim that metabolomes add new, independent dimensions. Supplementary tables and figures reinforce the analyses by showing robustness across datasets. Overall, each figure clearly supports the paper's main argument.

- ➔ Summarize the authors' line of argument in your own words and note whether you think their arguments are supported, and why or why not (or if you can't judge because something is unclear).

The authors argue that leaf metabolomes reveal two major axes of plant functional variation—chemical defense and leaf longevity—that are not captured by traditional ecological traits. Their analyses of >700 species show that these metabolic axes are consistent across climates and largely independent of classical traits. Based on the clarity of the results and figures, their conclusions appear well supported.

### (3) Note anything you think is either especially well done, interesting, or unclear.

Do this while addressing points (1) and (2) above and then reading the rest of the paper.

Just make free notes here. You can sort them later if needed.

The impact of different sampling/LC-MS methods between datasets is not clear to me .

### (4) Summarize your thoughts about and understanding of the paper.

The following very useful suggestions come from the [eLife assessment](#) model.

Answer these questions: for whom is this study of interest? What are the authors' aims? What did they do (measure/observe/analyze) in what system? How well does the evidence support the conclusions?

**Example:** “This **landmark** study provides a comprehensive morphological and molecular description of the majority of documented neuronal cell types in the mouse cortex. This provides an extraordinary resource that will be invaluable to the whole neuroscience community. The methodology for combining expansion microscopy with spatially resolved transcriptomics across tissues is **exceptional** and establishes a new standard in the field.”

#### Use standardized terminology

For breadth of interest (and potential breadth of impact):

**Landmark:** findings with profound implications that are expected to have widespread influence

**Fundamental:** findings that substantially advance our understanding of major research questions

**Important:** findings that have theoretical or practical implications beyond a single subfield

**Valuable:** findings that have theoretical or practical implications for a subfield

**Useful:** findings that have focused importance and scope

For strength of support:

**Exceptional:** exemplary use of existing approaches that establish new standards for a field

**Compelling:** evidence that features methods, data and analyses more rigorous than the current state of the art

**Convincing:** appropriate and validated methodology in line with current state-of-the-art

**Solid:** methods, data and analyses broadly support the claims with only minor weaknesses

**Incomplete:** main claims are only partially supported

**Inadequate:** methods, data and analyses do not support the primary claims

This **solid** study is useful for plant ecologists, evolutionary biologists, and researchers in chemical ecology . They aim to find out whether leaf metabolomes reveal functional aspects of plants that classical traits cannot, and to identify major axes of metabolic variation across species. They measured leaf metabolites in over 700 tropical and temperate species using LC-MS, calculated chemical properties for each metabolite, derived five species-level metabolic traits, and analyzed variation using PCA. The evidence is strong: the PCA shows two main axes (chemical defense and leaf longevity), these axes are independent of classical traits, and the figures clearly support the conclusions.