

Critically evaluating with skim, scan and scrutinise - transcript

In this video, we're going to talk about three approaches that might be able to help you manage all the reading you have to do in an effective and critically minded way: they are skim, scan and scrutinise.

First up, skimming as a reading technique. When you skim, you assess a whole pile of stuff to get an impression of overall content and main ideas. You can get rid of things that just aren't relevant and get some kind of priority order.

When using this technique with a journal article, read the abstract first, then the aims which you might find are a separate section, or may be towards the end of the introduction/review. Whatever you do, don't read the whole literature review at this point. We're still looking for highlights. You should now be getting an idea of what type of paper this is. It could be a review, opinion, original research, case study, or method paper.

Now skip to the conclusion to see what the main findings were.

After that, you can look at the figures, and possibly the methods, depending on how much time you have to spend, and how important methods will be to your own needs.

While you're doing all of this, remember to keep notes: summarise all of your initial skimming thoughts into a few sentences, so you don't have to do the whole process again!

For a research paper this could be something like: "A identified a gap of B and used the method of C to determine if D. A concludes that E" and add in anything of note e.g. interesting method, comprehensive literature review etc. Again what is interesting to you will depend on what it is you're looking for or trying to focus on!

Next we've got scanning. This is a related technique to skimming and can be really helpful when working through bigger blocks of writing like book chapters but can still have some relevance to shorter articles too.

Cast your eye over the page to look for key words or phrases. You can also use inbuilt online search functions for electronic resources or scanned material you're accessing using other digital software like a screen reader. Again, summarise what you read as you go, such as through using a sentence for each topic you encounter. Be sure to note down anything that might be useful for your particular needs.

So now you know how to read productively but that's just one part of the puzzle, you also need to read critically. This is the Scrutinise bit of the process.

Critical reading is about actively questioning what you're looking at and using different criteria to judge whether it is the right piece of research for your needs. As you might imagine, there are lots of different frameworks and guides to help you read critically and we've adapted one for you to use today.

This is the PROMPT framework which we've borrowed from the Open University. Each letter stands for a specific stage of the critical reading process. We've deliberately edited it down for this video. So P is for presentation – does it look right? By this we mean, is it presented in the way you would expect? If it is a journal article from one of our databases, you would expect it to be laid out neatly,

with proper editing and headings. Is the language what you would expect for the type of thing you're looking at?

Perhaps an obvious one but is it about the right topic? This is the R for Relevance bit. There is a lot of research out there and sometimes something might look like it matches your needs but as you start to read, you realise the focus is about something completely different.

Next we have O for Objectivity, or more simply can you trust the author? Are they pushing an agenda through their work. This can be easy to spot if you're reading an opinion piece or a review as these are written from the author's perspective so take them all with a pinch of salt.

Most scientific literature has a clear methodology section so with our M standing for Method, it's always useful to check if the methods used to underpin the research findings are sound. Did they do the tests you expected? Is the sample size really small so not representative? Does something just not add up?

Hopefully if you're using databases, you'll know where a piece of work has come from but if you're doing searches on other platforms like Google, be sure to know exactly where something is coming from, or its Provenance which is what our second P stands for. This is especially helpful so you don't accidentally download some pseudoscience article from a denialist website. They can be easy to miss sometimes as some research out there has been written by scientists pushing a bad agenda.

Finally, we have T for Timeliness or, is the work up to date? Now you might be looking for something historical so this question is subjective but typically if you're looking for the most recent thinking on your topic, you'll want to get something from at least the last few years.

So there you have three techniques to help you get through your reading while making sure you're asking all the right critical questions as you go.