

Questions to pose when reading a scholarly text

(mainly based on “Questions to ask while reading a scholarly article” by Glenn Hendler, Fordham University)

Answering the following questions as part of your reading strategy will help you to better understand scholarly articles. In doing so, the core arguments of a text can be elucidated and elaborated. Answers should be short (one to three sentences) and aim to be concise summaries.

1. **Who** wrote the article?

- Scholarship is done by real people who have often written other texts. Background information can help to understand what the author is saying.
- What information is important depends on the article. For example, it may be important to know what field the author comes from. In other cases, it is important to know whether the author is a senior researcher or a PhD student who is publishing part of his/her thesis.

2. **When and where** was the article published?

- Scholarship is not timeless. It makes a difference whether the article is from the founding era of a field or builds on a long-standing scientific discourse.
- If the article was published in a scientific journal, the focus of the journal provides valuable information about the article. Is it a broad-based, interdisciplinary journal? Is the journal the flagship of a particular discipline?
- If it is a book chapter or a contribution from a journal collection, this may provide information about the aims of the article. Is it one of several similar analyses in a book? Is there an introduction and an abstract? Is the article part of a collection on a topic that is not clear from the article itself?

3. What is the **topic** of the article?

It is important to find out what the article is and is not about. This includes, for example:

- the **geographical focus**: Is it about Germany or Europe or the Anglo-Saxon language area? Is it a comparison between Germany and another country? Is it about a specific region?
- the **chronological focus**: for example, is it about the 1910s, the interwar period or the last five years?
- the **demographic focus**: Is it about certain nationalities, genders, classes, ethnic groups, religious groupings, age groups, etc.)?

4. What is the **research question** of the article?

- What question does the author want to answer with his/her article? A scholarly article must address a question that has more than one answer. Otherwise, there is a risk that the author merely confirms his/her opinion. Every article is based on a question, and the answer to that question is the hypothesis of the article. The research question should relate directly to the topic (3.) and the sources from questions 6 and 7. It usually comes in the form of a grammatical question. It is possible that an article has more than one research question, but there is usually one central question driving the content.
- There is a difference between a research question (which can be answered within the article's topic and archive) and a more general theoretical question, which the article may contribute to answer but cannot answer on its own.

5. What is the **thesis** of the article?

- The thesis of the article should be framed as an answer to its research question. If you put the thesis next to the research question you've posed, and it does not make sense as an answer to the research question, you need to reformulate either the research question or the thesis until they make sense together. Sometimes, however, the author realises during his/her research that he/she has asked the wrong question and needs to reframe it. Contrary to popular belief, this is not a failure, but a clear indication of learning.
- You are only able to fully understand the thesis of an article if you know what question the article is trying to answer and how these answers came about.

6. What are the **primary sources** of the article?
 - What materials (texts, images, websites, interviews, data) are analysed in the article to answer the research question? Part of this answer can be derived from the research question and the focus of the research. For example, if the chronological dimension of an article covers the years 1900-1910, logically documents from the years 1900-1910 should be studied. If the research question deals with the opinion formation of young people in social networks, it is logical to interview young people (and not adults, seniors or children).
7. What **secondary sources** does the article use?
 - What is the author's position on previously published literature? How does he/she position him/herself in relation to existing arguments? On whose work and which theories does the author rely? Which opinions does he/she reject? Is there a scholarly opinion that he/she tries to refute?
8. **What** has the author undertaken to answer the research question?
 - What exactly did the author do? Did he/she conduct ethnographic interviews? Has he/she compiled statistics or analysed statistics compiled by others? Did he/she closely examine novels, films, poems, TV programmes, advertisements, etc. using discourse analysis, content analysis or other methods? Or has he/she processed and interpreted data from an archive?
9. Which **theories** does the author adopt and apply?
 - Depending on the article, it is more or less clear which theory was used. Has the author looked at the sources through a post-modern, feminist or Marxist lens? Is the article based on the Frankfurt School or on theories of cultural hegemony, myths and symbols? Does it deal with theories of nationalism, globalisation or gender theories?
 - What questions does the article address that go beyond the research question? For example, an article could examine how society and media influence each other. However, this is a theoretical question and not the research question. The article could explore a specific example of this phenomenon to help answer the theoretical question. But it is unlikely that the article will be able to answer this theoretical question, as both the sources and the focus for the research need to be narrowed.