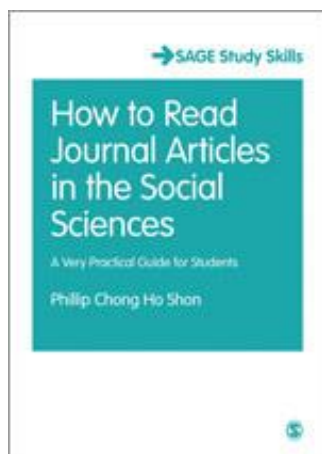


Book Review



How to Read Journal Articles in the Social Sciences: A Very Practical Guide for Students

By Phillip Chong Ho Shon

London: Sage Publications (2012).

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Reviewed by **Eleanor Byram**

Within a few pages of starting to read this book my overall feeling was one of irritation: at the apparent irrelevance of the first couple of chapters (not to mention the noxious topics: cleaning 'poop'); irritation at the use of vocabulary that would not be 'operational' to the average, non-English speaking international student (abstruse, concatenation, bovine scatology – oh Academia, if you mean bullsh*t, just write it) and which would grate on this 'native'; and irritation at the page of codes, which seemed as though they would be impossible to remember. Also, if I were feeling picky I might question the prolific use of articles on crime and black males to illustrate practical examples. Yes the author is a Criminologist, but there are surely less contentious illustrations to be found than journal articles on crimes committed by the 'black underclass'. By page 26 I had photocopied page 3 – the code sheet – to obviate the need to turn back to this page to understand the abbreviations in the text. By the end I was inspired to revisit certain key literatures in my own studies and to improve the focus of my thesis.

The author claims on the final page that 'students are and have been the only invisible audience' (p.104) he has had in mind throughout the book. It seems strange therefore that the student is referred to in the third person and that the text appears to address an audience (Tutors? Supervisors?), which might be interested in how a student - apparently someone other than the reader - should read an article. Even in the most helpful chapters, Shon writes 'sections are reproduced in order to teach students how to...' Confused students looking for a way forward might benefit from a more direct approach – 'if *you* do this *you* will achieve your goals'.

The introduction makes the following claim: 'a book that teaches students how to read cannot be long and cumbersome; it needs to be succinct, concise and operational – not long-winded and theoretical. *How to Read Journal Articles in the Social Sciences* meets that goal', (p.4). Although the inspiration for the book is clearly important to the author, in practical terms it could easily have been summed up as 'for advice on grammar and style, refer to Strunk and White (1979) - for advice on how to read an article, turn to page 22'. This would have obviated the need to read the first three chapters - including a disgusting through obviously character-forming piece about cleaning toilets - and several negative thoughts about the author and his style, before arriving at what really is a 'succinct, concise and operational' guide to reading – and by default, writing – a journal article.

Shon's intention is to teach students 'the techniques of critical reading' (2) because 'Writers have difficulty developing new ideas because they have not learned the art of textual criticism and critical reading – not because new ideas do not exist', (2). Chapter 4 instructs

on how to write the Abstract, General Introduction and Methods section. The codes are spelled out in full often enough to ensure that they graduate from alphabet soup to useful tools. Multiple illustrations in the form of published Abstracts, with their sentences numbered and suggestions for coding located easily, provide a straightforward introduction not only to reading skills but to Shon's methods. Chapter 5 covers the reading of General Literature Reviews, Psychology Introductions, and Results sections. It points out the pitfalls of 'laundry list' reviews (37) and how to avoid them. Grammatical cues such as disjunctions are highlighted and their function as a signpost for the reader made clear. Patterns are identified and links are made: how rationales (RATs) are derived from GAPs and Critiques of Previous Literature (CPL). It does not only say what should be read, and by extension written: it demonstrates these things. Supervisors take note. Do not be distracted by the 'Psychology': as Chapter 8 shows, the reading Methodology works for a wide variety of articles.

Chapter 6 covers the Discussion and Conclusion sections. Shon emphasises the importance of making connections: both to the work of previous researchers and between the sections of their own work. He demonstrates how language use indicates what the article is addressing (GAP) and what might be addressed by the author or other researchers in the future, Recommendations for Future Works (RFW) and Relevant Points to Pursue (RPP). By now the reader is almost fully-equipped to write as well as read journal articles. Chapter 7 presents a few practical tools in the shape of highlighter, ruler and pen as well as advice against curling up on a sofa with an academic text with the observation that 'pleasure-reading is the corporeal opposite of academic reading'. What Shon makes clear in this chapter is that reading is work and should be approached as such. The recommended tools give their own clue, it being almost impossible to use a ruler or highlighter whilst slumped (un)comfortably in an armchair. Chapter 9 restates the idea that reading is not secondary to writing – rather it is half or more of the writing process.

As is perhaps fitting for a book about reading, there is little illustration although the language in the practical chapters is for the most part accessible, rendering this more of an observation than a criticism. The 'codes' occasionally veer away from the acronym (POC = Point of Critique) to the confusing (WTD= What they do, whilst WTDD = what they did) to the non-code (GAP = gap) their language clearly originating in the experience of the author rather than the most obvious for the student (WIL= Will this theoretical...etc) but this becomes irrelevant with familiarity of use and in practical terms there is nothing to stop the student developing alternative codes to reflect Shon's definitions.

After a sceptical start, irritated by style and the wait for the practical guidance, this reader learned a great deal and is convinced by this short, sharp guide - and equally convinced it could be more so. At £16.99 for the paperback edition, it is not the cheapest 'How to' guide. However, I would certainly have been grateful if someone had referred me to a library copy at the beginning of the study process (it would save a lot of first years pretending they have any clue what they should be doing). In summary it is a very useful text to be recommended for all students who want practical help to demystify some of the common academic processes. Typically students appear to be expected to pick up these skills either without instruction, through the rare benevolence of their over-worked supervisor or through existing academic texts, which Shon himself points out are often of overwhelming proportions and thus inappropriate to the task.

References

Strunk, W. Jr. and White, E. B. (1979) *The Elements of Style* (3rd ed.) Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.