



Research Reading Guide of the Month
SEPTEMBER 2003

Locke, L.F. (2003).

Don't Panic!

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is a mythical electronic book, the product of author Douglas Adams' fertile mind, and a recurring topic of discussion in his hilarious science fiction quadrilogy. Containing over a million pages, Adams' described the Guide as "providing everything you need to know about anything." Such a resource would naturally serve as a wonderfully useful companion for anyone launching out on a tour of alien and unexplored places. More to our present purpose, however, is the encouraging message reputed to be printed on the book's cover (in large friendly letters). That most fundamental bit of advice extended to every galactic traveler is: "DON'T PANIC!"

As research reports (which are alien and previously unexplored places for many readers) usually don't come with such helpful advice on the cover, I think you will find it useful to print some up for yourself (of course, in "large friendly letters"). Inscribe the maxim "DON'T PANIC" on a slip of paper and then tack it up somewhere that will be in plain sight while you hitchhike your way through the next report. Not only will you find it reassuring, but also it will direct you to some really practical strategies.

When you encounter something that appears completely foreign, or that seems confusing, ambiguous, contradictory, or incomplete, look up at your slip of advice and just keep calm. Here are five reasons why that is practical advice:

1. In many reports you will find that something you don't understand in the opening pages is explained (or becomes clear) in subsequent pages. You just have to suppress any sense of panic, plant a red flag in the margin, and keep right on reading. All may be made clear in due course.
2. In many reports you will find that not understanding a particular point does not make any real difference in terms of what you find valuable in the study. That being the case (and you can be assured that it is), insisting on a thorough understanding of every word and point as you read along is not an effective strategy. Take your time, go step by step, and use your puzzle solving skills, but if you reach a point at which those strategies don't work, just keep calm and keep going.
3. In many reports you will encounter unfamiliar words or constructs that can be adequately clarified by non-technical references you already have at hand – such as a dictionary, the glossary at the back of any research textbook, or the use of your computer to consult a favorite encyclopedia. In fact, you may find it more efficient to just flag any bothersome points and postpone use of reference assistance until it becomes clear that neither of the two outcomes listed above is going to come to your rescue!
4. In many instances, whatever it is that you don't understand will pose no problem for somebody else – an instructor, a friend with more research reading experience, or just a fellow hitchhiker. At the least, two heads generally are better than one. What you have to do is not panic and simply ask for assistance.
5. Finally, it is important to understand that there are two parties in the transaction of reading a research report – the writer, and you, the reader. While your capacity to understand (general background, previous experience with research, study skills, etc.) is important in navigating through the story of a study, it distinctly is not the only factor. It takes two to tango, and the quality of writing and organization of the report can make understanding easy or difficult.

Further, inadequate writing even can make understanding impossible. That is, you will encounter instances in which neither you nor the author could possibly understand what is on the page. All of which makes any feeling of guilt about "my failure to understand" a waste of your valuable time.

Remember that in the vast majority of instances a single missing point of information will not be lethal to reaching a general understanding of what is in a research report. Whether you are hitchhiking through the vast macrocosm of our galaxy, or exploring the mysterious microcosm of a research report, the first and best advice is always the same. Don't Panic! Use your wits, press on, and most of the time things will work out just fine.

(Reading Guides from previous months are available in the Unlock Research Archives. Simply click on the "Archives" button at the left of the main page.)

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