



Research Reading Guide of the Month
JULY 2003

Locke, L.F. (2003).

Read Step by Step.

An alternative title for this guideline might be "Use the Headings." As arcane as they may seem at first, research reports are nothing more than elaborate stories – or, to be more precise, histories. As such, they must address a familiar set of questions: what, why, who, where, how, and with what outcome? The headings you will find in most reports, and those I have inserted in the annotations offered here for "Research Reports of the Month," mark the locations where you will find the authors' answers.

The actual headings that appear in a report or annotation will vary in exact wording, sequence, and number, but they all must cover the same territory: The Study (what and why?), The Participants (who and where?), The Design and Method (how?), and The Results (with what outcome?). Other headings and sub-headings that appear in some reports, such as Review of Literature, Instrumentation, Analysis, Conclusions, Discussions, Implications, etc., are just supplemental signposts that mark other possible divisions in the step-by-step unfolding of a story.

If you pay attention to the headings, checking them off as you proceed to read, you will have a tool for keeping order and maintaining a logical sequence. In turn, that same sense of progression through a sequence of descriptions and explanations also will serve as a buffer against the temptation to try and comprehend too much, too quickly. Just follow the heading road signs and leave grasping the whole picture for the last page. This is yet another instance for which part/whole learning is an effective strategy.

After a first tour through a report, if you sense something is missing, just head back to the heading where it should be found. In many instances you can locate the fugitive fact. Sometimes, of course, genuine gaps in the story occur simply because the author forgot to include something, or, in the case of my study annotations for this web site (which, by their nature are only abbreviated versions of a much longer and more complete story), I may have decided that what you are missing was not really essential to understanding the story – and deliberately left the material out. In either case, I can reassure you that it is unlikely that a single omission will be lethal to your grasp of the main elements in most studies. Just mark a caution flag in the margin and proceed to follow the heading – one step at a time.

If you would like to have a checklist designed for step-by-step reading through the full length of an original research report (with more detail than is provided by the set of headings used in my annotations here), one can be found in *Reading and Understanding Research* (2004) by Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso. The list is laid out in a two-page form, has been extensively tested through use with beginning research readers, and for many seems to be helpful as a tool for staying organized and not becoming overwhelmed. Please feel free to make copies for your own use.