Unlock Research
Research for Physical Educators

Research Reading Guide of the Month
DECEMBER 2004

Locke, L.F. (2004).

Stay Organized and You Won't Get Lost.

Getting back to basics. This is the last reading guide for 2004, and that makes it a good time to return to the basic purpose of this Unlock section. At the beginning, I set out to make suggestions that might help you read research reports with less difficulty and greater understanding. In the three monthly guides this fall, the topics have strayed rather far from that original purpose, and while those may have been interesting side-trips, it is time to get back to basics.

Feeling overwhelmed? Of all the problems that people report when they have made their first attempts at reading research (reports, reviews, annotations, or just discussions) the first and most heartfelt is that the task feels *overwhelming*. To put that word into the content of a simple analogy, there is just so much detail that their mental circuit breakers trip to the off position in order to prevent the total chaos of overload. When that happens, when there is so much presented that we can't keep track of it, we describe ourselves as being overwhelmed. Or, as my Grandmother used to say, "It all just makes my head swim."

Not knowing what matters. You will notice that this is a general and nonspecific problem. It is not related to the familiar complaints about technical jargon, seemingly endless references to other studies, arcane concepts without ties to any recognizable reality in everyday experience, or impenetrable mathematic operations. Those are particular complaints and, typically, they come later in the learning process. Being overwhelmed is just about having too much to consider and not knowing which things in a research report really matter, and have to be remembered, and which things are just filler.

Avoid drowning in a sea of details. I know of no magic trick or intellectual gimmick that is going to make reading about research an easy task when you are starting out. There is, however, a way to deal with the particular problem of feeling overwhelmed. It is a tool designed to help you stay organized while reading. Having an organizer is like having a life preserver that you can cling to when you feel like you might drown in an ocean of details.

Recording to stay organized. This lifesaving tool may take the form of a checklist, recording form, sequence map, or even a color coding system using highlighters. Whatever the format, the purpose is to keep a simple record of major points, in whatever order they may appear in what you are reading, so that you get a reassuring sense that you can follow the main story in the report. In other words, this tool allows you to impose an order, your personal order, on the flood of detail. Some things do matter more than others, and armed with a list of those critical things to watch for, you have a primitive but powerful way to stay organized.

The notecard bonus. In addition to avoiding overloaded circuit-breakers, if you keep a brief (and legible) note describing each critical point as it turns up, you also have a permanent record of what you found in the research. That bonus will be more useful to some readers than to others,

but many people have told me that just making out the record adds significantly to the organizing (and reassuring) power of the tool – whether or not they later make actual use of the record.

The powerful freedom of ignoring. It usually comes as a revelation to beginners, but the first function of such organizers is to liberate you from trying to pay attention to everything. Just as some things you read do really matter, there is an awful lot in a research report that is not critical to grasping the main point. Once you grasp that proposition, there is real empowerment in the understanding that if you make a mistake and ignore or skip over something that later turns out to have been important – you always can go back with no harm done. The report isn't going to dry up and blow away. Without that panicky sense of risk, you can just plough ahead with the work of filling out your organizer by recording the things that do seem to matter.

You already own a working model. Staying organized by using a research reading tool is not rocket science; it works for virtually everyone; it can be mastered in one or two trials; it can be discarded when it no longer serves your needs; and, best of all, you probably have a fairly serviceable version of one already filed away in your head. Honesty, however, requires that we pause here so that I can come clean on that point.

The wonderful 12-step guides. Of course I have a favorite version of such an instrument. My colleagues and I have worked on it for years to get it refined so that it gives the most help with the least fuss. It has been published in one of the textbooks described on the main page of Unlock [Locke, Silverman & Spirduso (2004) Reading and Understanding Research 2nd ed. Sage]. In actuality, there are three of them, one each for studies using qualitative and quantitative approaches and another for reading reviews of research. They are called 12-Step Research Reading Guides, and in the book they come equipped with careful user directions. And although it would be wonderful if you would all rush out and buy the book, in truth, you don't really need to do that. To get started, at least, you don't need my organizer – or that of anyone else.

All you need is what you learned in school. It may have been in a language arts or English class, a biology lab section, or (if you were lucky) in a journalism class, but somewhere you learned to build a report around the questions of *who, what, when, where, why,* and *how* (in whatever sequence was prescribed). Exactly the same tactic can be used in reverse. You just look for and take note of how those same familiar questions have been answered by the author of the report you are reading. There are some tricks, however, to making that work smoothly and efficiently. Here are some that have worked well in the past.

Set it up. Lay out your list of questions in advance, use very brief descriptive phrases for each, and print them on both sides of a sheet of paper leaving no more than two or three lines between each.

Keep it short. There is a good reason for not giving yourself as much room to record your answer as you think you might need or want. If you have the space, the normal impulse will be to write down so much detail that the whole task quickly becomes tiresome – and you will quit using the organizer. Keep your answers so brief that they are like shorthand. Record only a few cryptic words to trigger memory, and no more.

Just do it. Then actually use the form. Don't expect to fill out the blanks in sequence because authors often don't give the answers in a tidy serial order. Just record what turns up, in the space where it belongs, in whatever order it appears.

Here is an example based on my own approach to reading research. I have left out the spaces for recording. Your own version might have some different items (because you think they are important) or put the questions in a different order.

Who wrote this? **Where** and **when** was it published, and **what** is the title?

In general, **what** was the question in this study? **What** was it mostly about?

Why did the researcher(s) do the study, **what** was the purpose?

How did the study fit into what we know? **Why** was it important to do the study?

Who was studied? **Where** was the study done and **what** was the environment?

What information (data) was collected, and **how** was it obtained and recorded?

How was the collected data inspected to make sense out of it (the analysis)?

What did the researcher(s) conclude, and **what** assertions are made about what was learned?

What cautions are offered concerning those conclusions, and **why** are they offered?

What did I learn from this study that is worth remembering, and **how** might it be useful in my work?

That's it. There's no high tech, no profound philosophy, and nothing that you didn't learn in school. With a recording form like that, you can stay organized and never feel overwhelmed by detail. Also, at the end, you may have some blank spaces that clearly signal what you missed (or what was not there). Fine, you can go back and hunt some more; no harm done. Finally, if you didn't cheat, you now have a bare bones set of notes on a single sheet of paper. At just a glance those notes can joggle your memory to recall the whole story of the study, including many of the details you didn't have to write down.

Next month, in 2005, the Research Reading Guide for January will deal with making maps so that you never get lost inside the wilderness of a research report.

Your comments regarding this guide will be welcome at lflocke@hotmail.com.