

Research Reading Guide of the Month  
JUNE 2003

Locke, L.F. (2003).

**Take Your Time!**

Reading research is a task that has low tolerance for haste. Whether it be an abstract, an executive summary, or the full text of a report, if you are going to bother to do it at all – you may as well take the time do it right. That means going slowly enough to notice the small things, and pausing frequently enough to consider the unexpected things. It takes a little time to compare points in the unfolding story of a study with the record of your own observations and experiences, but it will be time well spent. What is valuable in a study may lie as much in the thoughts it provokes as in the conclusions it asserts. None of that will be possible, however, if you turn the reading task into a race.

By the time we have finished 12 years of school, most of us have acquired reading skills that put a premium on getting through documents as rapidly as possible – often by selective skipping and firm resistance to any detours for reflection on content. I won't argue that those skills are not handy (and in some instances even appropriate or necessary) in the general rush of living. What I do want to assert is that they will not serve you well when reading research. You can be businesslike in your approach without dawdling, and thoughtful without being inefficient.

At the least, if you are in unfamiliar territory, a more deliberate pace will allow you to avoid getting thoroughly lost and confused. For that, most of us need to go back and reread difficult sections, underline key phrases, make notes in the margin, use a dictionary, and, generally, allow time enough to think about why the story is unfolding as it does. After years of plowing through research reports, most of the veteran scholars I have known still approach the task of reading published studies as an exercise in puzzle solving – even the best of study reports can feel like doing a crossword from the *Times*.

There is, however, a reason for taking your time that goes far beyond ensuring simple comprehension of a study's findings. As with so much else in life, properly reading a good report is a matter of fully appreciating the journey – and not just a matter of getting to the destination. If you take the time to notice, you can learn valuable things from *everything* in a report – starting with what the author chooses to put into the abstract (and chooses to omit), and ending with what might look intriguing among the items in the reference list.

That same injunction – take your time – also applies to the moments after you turn the last page. When you think you understand the content of a report, at least in general outline, you are more likely to remember those facts and ideas next week and next year if you will pause right then for some immediate reflection. Ask yourself how the investigator's assertions fit with what you already knew or had guessed, how what you just learned might serve some practical use, or how you might have improved the study (or, even, how you might have written a better report). Like any substantial meal, a good study requires time -- both for the dining and for the digestion.