

How to read a phonology paper

Reading a research paper is an active process—moving your eyes over all the words on the page is not enough. Read the paper critically: What is it trying to show? Does it do a good job? Are you convinced? How do the ideas in this paper fit in with other ideas you've seen?

This handout presents some tips to help you learn to read a paper actively and critically.

First, try to get a sense of the overall purpose and perspective of the paper. You might want to start by reading the introduction, the conclusion, and the headings of the various sections of the paper.

- What is the author's *goal or main point*? In a well-written paper, this will be stated clearly in the introduction and summarized in the conclusion. In a less well-written paper, you may have to hunt for it.
- What kind of *perspective* is the author taking toward the paper? Keeping the author's perspective in mind can help you understand what kind of points they are trying to make in the course of their argumentation, and why they might want to be making those points. For example:
 - Is the paper a textbook article, an introduction to a new theoretical framework, or a summary/review article—something where the purpose is to provide an introduction to or overview of a particular topic?
 - Is the author responding to earlier work and trying to show that it is wrong or insufficient?
 - Is the author trying to extend a previous idea to a new area or context?

(More than one perspective may appear in the same paper.)

Then, work through the paper and evaluate the author's argumentation. You have already determined what it is they want to convince you of. Now it is time for you to decide how persuasive their argumentation actually is.

- Many authors will present multiple pieces of evidence or argumentation in support of their main proposal. You may find it useful to take some notes as you read the paper, perhaps making an outline that lists each supporting argument that the author lays out.
- Whenever an author discusses data from a language in the course of making an argument, that language data has been included in the paper for a reason. Look at each language that is discussed and try to determine why the author is talking about it. In what way does it provide evidence in favor of the point at hand? Be critical: are you convinced by the author's approach to this language? Can you think of another way of accounting for the same data that makes the author's argument invalid or less strong?

- Whenever the author gives a chart, a diagram, a tableau, or any other kind of non-text example to illustrate the analysis, you may wish to work through it yourself. This is especially true if you find the author's proposal complicated or unclear — looking at how it is applied to a specific example may help you understand the proposal better. Be critical here too: Does the formal analysis actually work the way the author thinks it does? (Sometimes you will catch mistakes this way.) Does the author's argument still hold up?

Finally, think about the broader implications of the proposals made in the paper. This is an important step that will become easier and more interesting as you gain more experience reading and thinking about ideas in phonology — and the ideas that you come up with as you think about the implications of a paper may lead to research projects of your own.

- What changes has the author proposed to make to the formal phonological model? For example, has a new distinctive feature, a new type of phonological structure, or a new constraint (or constraint type) been proposed? Or has the author proposed some kind of change in how phonological analysis should be carried out procedurally?
- Will these changes have any positive or negative impact on other areas of phonological theory?
 - Is the author trying to get rid of a feature, a constraint, etc., that was important in the phonological analysis of some other phenomenon or language? If so, can the other case be reanalyzed in a way that is compatible with the present author's proposal? If not, is there a way of deciding between the two conflicting proposals?
 - What are the cross-linguistic or typological implications of the proposal? Do you see any potentially problematic or useful predictions?
 - Does the author's proposal help solve any other outstanding problems in phonology that you know about? Does it provide evidence for one side or the other of an ongoing debate?