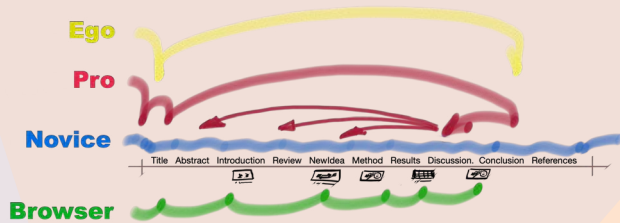


Academic reading (dis)orders

Not everyone reads from the beginning through the end. For a piece of fiction, yes, but for academic writing, no. It may help you to understand how your readers navigate your work:



The Novice or a student who doesn't know why he should read the text, may start at line one, and plod line by line to the end.

The Professional has an information need and is looking for it. She starts at the title, then does the abstract, jumps to the conclusions, and works her way back to the discussion. At each stage she may conclude "no, this isn't going to be it and stop". **So make sure your abstract also summarizes the findings, i.e., is not just an introduction.** After the discussion, the pro may go to the review (to check it's well connected), the introduction (only if she feels she's new to the topic), or the methods (especially if she doesn't trust the conclusions).

The Browser, or Visual Reader, will skip through the pages, and react to what pops out: visuals and tables. **Use visuals to highlight your main ideas or claims, and make sure your captions lure the reader to the text.**

The Ego, or Social Reader, will start with the names and references: does this writer cite the works I know? Do I know him? Do I know his university? **That's why there is blind peer review: so reviewers focus on the content.**

Serve the Visual Reader

In browsing for information, we all use quick scanning to pick up promising bits. Visually-oriented people (designers?) even more so.

Even in a text-dominated channel, such as an article, it helps to 'catch the eye'. Visuals can also organize a complex set of data, give a visual summary of an argument, or give a feel for 'the real thing'.

Your title appears in a table of contents. Will your reader see it and recognize what it is about?

The keywords are a mini-summary, just like terms in a search query.

The abstract summarizes the entire paper, not just the introduction, but also the findings and conclusions!

A visual can attract attention and summarize or highlight important text. The caption leads the interested reader to a further explanation.

Visuals

Diagrams highlight (abstract) relations in an argument.

Tables allow for comparison in several directions.

Photos and quotes, can show evidence and explanation as instances for an abstract claim.

Use these deliberately: eye-candy (just pretty pictures, not connected to the content) is likely to damage your message (unless maybe if you are making a commercial brochure, but that doesn't count as 'academic communication').

Make a Thumbnail Sketch

Designers often are visual thinkers. Academic writing formats are often very fixed (e.g., 4 pages, 2 columns fontsize 10). Before you start writing, (1) think of

which core photos, diagrams, and tables you need to make your point, and make thumbnail sketches to see how large the different sections can be.



FIGURES, TABLES, CAPTIONS

Especially in academic publications, there are rules to how you use figures (and tables):

number each of them; **refer** to the number in the running text (preferably before the picture occurs in the layout).

Give it a **caption** that points out what the reader should notice. The evidence does not speak for itself. Compare these four examples of captions. Which one would make you want to read the connected text? Tip: don't postpone writing captions. Do them right away!



Figure 23



Figure 36 Senseo coffee maker



Figure 46 Picture of a bicycle



Figure 87 The two-part grille is BMW's visual signature