

Independent Study: Recording Your Research

Relevance: Why am I reading this?

- What key question does this source address? Keep this in mind as you read to stay focused.

Summary: What is this about?

- Try to summarize in your own words the main ideas conveyed.
- When reading, take note of key words or ideas that capture your interest and attention. The "aha!" moments.
- Quote important passages accurately and clearly. For example,
 - According to Fowler (1997), "Social capital is built up when people solve shared problems and satisfy economic, spiritual, recreational and other needs to levels which change over time" (p. 107).
- Remember, do not rely too heavily on quotations! It is more effective to reflect on what is written and present the information, as you understand it, in your own words.
 - Fowler describes how social capital can be damaged by mistrust, competition, exploitation. Non-governmental organizations can address these challenges through building partnerships to strengthen social capital. Fowler provides a list of twelve features that influence partnerships. Of these, I think the following are helpful to our situation.....

Analysis: What do I think of this?

- This is your interpretation of the author's meaning. Some questions you may ask yourself:
 - Do you agree or disagree? Why? Are you confused? Why? Maybe the author is using complicated jargon or is making contradictory claims.
 - Is it relevant to your work?
 - How does it tie in with what you already know on the topic, your own experience or observations?
 - Does it address your key question?

Comparison: How does it relate to other things I have read?

- Does it tie in with other sources you have referred to on this topic? Does it contradict other sources? Why do you think this is so?

Identifying Useful Sources of Information

When you find a document, you should take a quick scan through to see if it is worth reading. Things to look for may include:

- Summary/Abstract: a one-page summary of the contents
- Table of Contents: identify areas that may be of more interest
- Index: identify specific information, references to countries, etc.
- Introductory chapter or Preface: see if the introduction addresses a key question.
- Concluding chapter: It is OK to read the ending first! The main conclusions of the document should be summarized here.

- Bibliography: Who did this author use to construct this document? Do these look like credible sources to substantiate the author's work? Are there sources of information here that you may want to read as well?

Textual Analysis:

You can learn much about a source of information that may not be explicit, or obvious on the surface. Here are a few other questions to ask yourself as you approach a source of information to determine its usefulness to you:

Author:

- Who wrote it? Who is responsible for the content? What is their affiliation? University? International agency? NGO? Is this the opinion of fieldworker, a politician, a researcher?
- Name recognition: have you seen this author's name before?

Date:

- How old is the source? This may be important if you are looking at information that may become "dated" quickly, such as statistical data, medical research.
- While it is normally suggested to focus on recent literature, some foundational works that may be decades old are still worth revisiting... Freire (1969), Chambers (1983), Lindemann (1926).

Source:

- What does the source say about the usefulness of the information?
 - Academic publication: Scholarly research, but how relevant is it, and how easy is it to read?
 - NGOs may be practical, but can the work of one NGO be transferable to other situations?
 - Governments may reflect a political agenda, but also helpful in identifying the legal or bureaucratic parameters of your work.