



Shank, G., Brown, L., & Pringle, J. (2014). *Understanding education research*. Bolder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.

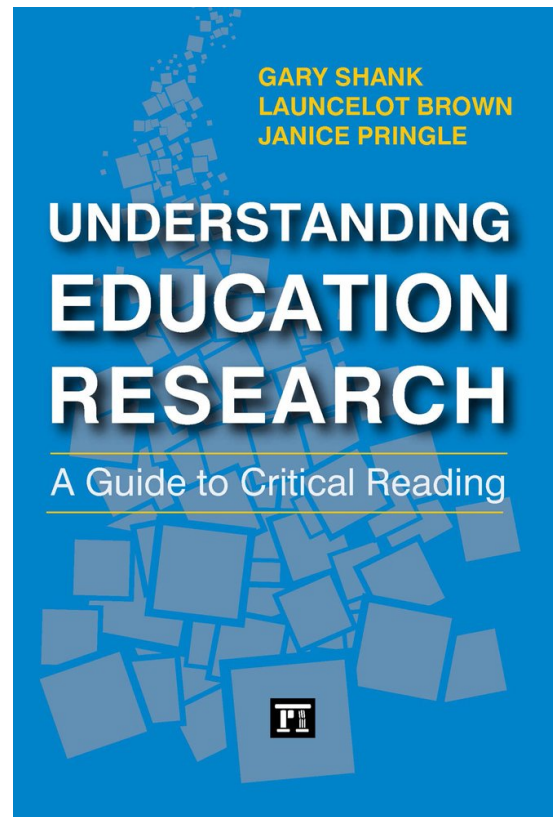
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A number of years ago I heard a story about a bank that trained its tellers to recognize counterfeit bills by having them count a large number of authentic dollar bills, by hand. By touching literally hundreds of thousands of these “good” bills the “fake” ones would be more easily identifiable – something would just feel wrong about them. Later, tellers would be given identifying markers they would use to conclusively determine the real from the fake. I have used this story in my own research methods class to justify the significant number of research articles I have students read; using well-written research articles so students would gain a sense of what good research looks like before beginning their own research efforts. I use a classic research methods text for the class as a guide to define and illustrate the essential elements of good research.

Shank, Brown and Pringle’s *Understanding Education Research: A Guide to Critical Reading* (2014) will greatly assist professors who take approaches similar to the one above. The authors’ purpose is to assist in the development of a “critical eye,” the ability to “seek out research, and then engage critically in its findings” (p. 5). This book is not a



substitute for a comprehensive introduction to research methods textbook; students enrolled in courses designed to assist students in the formation of a research design for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation would be disappointed in the brevity of explanation of the various approaches to research design and the authors' did not intend it to be so. The text is well suited, however, for a graduate course that specifically introduces students to the world of educational research with an eye of developing a critical evaluator's eye.

In the Preface, the authors make the case for the central role of research in the education process. It is research that drives the teacher's understanding of best practices in the classroom, the curriculum writer's development of effective curriculum, and the administrator's understanding of "what works in schools." Without research, "there is no formal process of schooling" in that there would be no evolution of the educational process resulting in a stagnation of educational progress. With the importance of research comes the need to be thoughtful evaluators of research.

The authors state that the book is designed help develop "research literacy," a specific kind of literacy necessary to be conversant in contemporary conversations in one's academic field. There are several reasons for this emphasis. One, conversations in the field have become more research and data focused. Gone are the days of just having a compelling argument rooted in one's philosophical orientation or personal bent. What "wins the day" is the case grounded by the current and best literature in the field. Second, and implied by the first reason, academics have become more discerning about the quality of academic research, not as willing to simply accept the word or work of the expert. In order to discriminate among the research claims, the authors believe that the professional needs to become research literate, to be able to "understand the principles of qualitative and quantitative research, understand how articles are put together, how to read complex articles, and how to evaluate the quality of the research" (p. 2).

To assist in achieving research literacy the authors provide "a step-by-step breakdown of the form and logic of a research article, (identify what is needed to) develop critical reading skills, provide

a practical sense of the skills being presented then offer a framework for question helpful in critical engagement of research materials, and explore the idea of research literacy as a necessary skill” (p. ix, parenthesis added). At the end, it is hoped that these features will develop “research critics,” individuals who are crucial consumers of educational research.

The authors situate the research critic on a spectrum within the broader educational community. This community has as its members anyone who is touched by the educational process. They identify four levels of engagement that in some ways involves all members at all levels of society: the concerned bystander (e.g. the voting public), the students and their parents (consumers), the research critic, and researchers themselves. The critic, to the authors, has knowledge and skill that surpass the consumer of educational research but are not necessarily researchers themselves. Under the best of circumstances they can be viewed as the gateway, or the gatekeeper, between the researchers and those who would implement their findings. They can highlight the best that research has to offer, consolidate consensus, and filter out the noise or research that is not done well or whose conclusions are tenuous. The practitioner – teachers and their administrators – fall between the consumer and the critic; they are often not schooled in the canons of research practice and need those with a keen eye to help both access and discern helpful research conclusions.

The authors devote an early chapter to the “Basic Approaches in Educational Research,” a survey-level overview of quantitative and qualitative research and their basic, constituent parts. The authors make the connection between these methodologies and the purpose of the researcher’s work: to answer the research question(s). They highlight the strength and limitations of each methodology along with an introductory-level explanation of the constitutive parts, relating each part to the role it plays in answering the research question.

Of the thirteen chapters in *Educational Research*, eight deal with specific parts or aspects of research articles: titles and abstracts, purpose and rationales, questions and arguments, references,

methods and procedures, quantitative and qualitative results and findings (one chapter each), and discussions and conclusions. These chapters provide a helpful guide to the constituent parts of a research article, giving the nascent research critic categories and an academic vocabulary to define various ways each of these parts can be used or developed. Many of the specifics categories and explanations can be found in more traditional research methods texts (i.e. methods and procedures, quantitative and qualitative results and findings) and are noted in the reference section. The authors do add categories and examples of their own, as well. Two examples are briefly exemplified here.

The Title

The authors suggest that there are five different types of titles that “almost always” give an immediate sense of what is contained in the article: the situation title, the process title, the equation title, the theoretical title, and the indirect title. So, for example, an author may indicate the location of the title (the situation title) by choosing a title such as: “Internet Use by High School Students in Rural Libraries.” A process title indicates that something is intended to “happen” as a direct response to an intervention: “Increasing Parental Involvement in Upper-Middle-Class Neighborhoods.” The authors suggest that the title gives “early and important information” about the article and sets the reader up for a more detailed understanding of what will come next. By paying attention to the title, especially when viewed from a perspective that identifies the alternate choice available to the author, the critic is given an early indication of the direction of article.

Types of Rationales

According to the authors, a rationale “addresses the role of the article in the context of the larger educational community” (p. 44). The rationale justifies the research and situates the work in the larger context of the educational community. The rationale answers the question: So what; what makes this work appealing, necessary, or important? The authors suggest five different types of research rationales: crisis, importance, gap-filling, depth,

and commitment. A “gap-filling” rationale will be familiar to doctoral students as one of the more common types or rationales for a research project. Others, though, are common research rationale and appear more often in research articles. For example, a “crisis” article, as the name suggests, provides the foundation for an article that might address a pressing problem in the educational community. Again, it is paying attention to the researchers’ explanation for their rationale that gives the keen reader a deeper insight into the researchers’ purpose for the article and a sense of the current status of the topic in the field.

These middle chapters provide short descriptions of the purpose of each section of a research article and note the variety of ways in which each section can be shaped to fulfill the purpose of the author(s) intended purpose for the article. Additionally, they also give the critic a conceptual framework and vocabulary to use to explain and describe how each section furthers the research effort. The research critic, then, is armed with more than a simple “I liked it” or “I found the article helpful” when describing or evaluating a research article.

The chapter titled “Advanced Concepts and Techniques” deals with additional topics that, for many, are standard items in the research process. One might quibble with whether “Reliability” and “Validity” are truly “advanced concepts” in that they explain several significant research concepts familiar and necessary in any research effort. Nonetheless, they are explained in this section as foundations for critical research. Additionally, several more decidedly advanced quantitative (i.e. Type I and II errors, effect size, correlations and variances) and qualitative techniques are addressed.

The book contains two appendices that could prove quite helpful to the research methods professor. Appendix A, “Guidelines for Article Evaluation,” lists twenty-four questions that guide the critic through the evaluation of an article. These questions take the observations from each section and state them as interrogatives, including all the options available under each topic (i.e. What sort of title does it have – equation, process, situation, theoretical, or indirect? What does this title tell you about the article from the very start?). Appendix B,

“Dissecting an Article” provides a template for a comprehensive critique of a research article along with an example of how each section might be written. Each Appendix could serve as a guide for a course assignment.

Understanding Educational Research would make a fine text for courses whose purpose is to introduce students the field of educational research and help them acquire skills to become the aforementioned research critics. At 122 pages, it could serve as a nice supplement to a course where the majority of the reading was dedicated to research articles that afford an opportunity to both learn to appreciate and critique research in their field.

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