

Reading and Understanding Political Science



A Guide For Instructors

Resource Site: <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lpowner>

- I. Background to the Document
- II. Suggested Uses and Limitations
- III. Additional Resources
- IV. Answer Key
- V. Feedback and Suggestions

I. Background to the Document

I developed the initial version of *Reading and Understanding (R&U)* in summer 2003 to support a paper assignment (given by Doug Lemke, for whom I was TA'ing at the time). The assignment asked students in Introduction to World Politics to read an empirical article, summarize it, and give a critique. *R&U* reflects this emphasis in its focus on identifying main ideas and results in empirical work and on thinking about possible criticisms. Because students also had to find their own articles for this paper, *R&U* also contains a typology of articles. The student document contains some 8 activities and 4 Bonus/Challenge activities. Some of these activities ask students to locate journal articles and use them to answer questions; others ask students to try their hands at various parts of the research design process.

R&U received a comprehensive revision in summer 2007, including development of this Instructor's Guide. Major changes to this edition include the addition of a summary page with four key points and box of bolded vocabulary, some revisions to the review quiz, and the removal of a brief subsection. Several article citations in the boxed activities have been updated to more recent work. Cosmetic changes include an enlarged left margin to accommodate binding into a course pack and more distinct subheadings.

II. Suggested Uses and Limitations

I typically assign *R&U* in Intro, and accompany it with one of each major type of article during the course of the term so that students can see the variation. *R&U* is also appropriate for an introduction to research methods class if this is the students' first (or an early) exposure to empirical research. In addition, *R&U* is also available on my website as a reference for upper-division students and others who may desire support for reading empirical work. Examples, articles, and activities in *R&U* come from world, comparative, and American politics. I occasionally give bonus points for the boxed activities, if they have not been assigned. Please link students to my website rather than reposting the document on your own site. (Posting to secure course-management sites such as Blackboard and WebCT is fine.)

R&U is not a comprehensive methods text. It glosses over a number of debates and presents a very simplistic version of understanding statistical analysis. In particular, it *does not* prepare students to conduct their own research. *R&U* is a consumer's guide to empirical

literature. Its purpose is to enable undergraduate students, and in particular freshmen in a general education, introductory-level course, to navigate and understand empirical work.

R&U has one main substantive limitation. Because of the assignment which prompted its creation, it does not address or support political theory articles and some types of public law work. I am unfamiliar with these fields' conventions of writing (beyond the general knowledge that the types of evidence and the manner of arguing are different). Similarly, *R&U* focuses explicitly on positivist political science. Interpretivist work is generally excluded. This means that some forms of scholarship, particularly including constructivist work that falls outside the positivist church (i.e., postmodernist, postpositivist, etc.), are not supported. Symbolic analysis, discourse analysis, and similar forms of scholarship follow a different logic of argumentation than the types of articles considered here. I welcome collaboration with anyone who is knowledgeable about these types of work to add them to *R&U*. Please email me at LPowner@umich.edu.

III. Additional Resources

My website (see p. 1) contains a series of "Article Helpers" which support the typology of articles offered in the first section of *R&U*. These come in two forms: one which is blank, for students to complete, and one which contains prompts for what to think about for each question or section of the Helper. These documents are in MS Word format (*.doc); instructors are welcome to edit these to reflect their own priorities or terminology.

Additionally, the website contains a PowerPoint presentation which introduces regression coefficients in the context of the 3 S's: sign, sureness, and size. Sureness is the concept of statistical significance without using that term; it asks students to think about how 'sure' we are that the sign is correct. I do this so that students can continue to use the term 'significant' in its layman's connotation of 'important,' rather than run the risk of misunderstandings and incorrect usage in the context of substantive versus statistical significance.

IV. Answer Key

An answer key is available for the activities and for the brief quiz at the end of the student packet. At the request of an instructor who assigns the activities as homework, the key is not available on the website. Please email me at LPowner@umich.edu to obtain a copy.

V. Feedback and Suggestions

User feedback and suggestions are very welcome. I am particularly interested in developing a set of student-friendly articles to include in the packet, and in locating collaborators to expand the types of articles supported by *R&U*. All feedback should be sent via email to LPowner@umich.edu. The next revision is scheduled for summer 2009.