

Academic Reading Strategies¹

Elayne Stecher

General questions to ask yourself:

1. How does this reading fit into the broader content of the course?
2. Which other readings is this text in conversation with?
 - a. Does this author agree or disagree with other authors we've read?
 - b. Do I find this argument more/less plausible than others we've read? Why?

Specific questions to ask about each reading:

1. What is the unit of analysis? (E.g., states, leaders, etc.)
2. What is the thesis or main argument of the piece?
 - a. What is the independent (explanatory) variable?
 - b. What is the dependent (outcome) variable?
3. What are the mechanisms for this argument?
4. What evidence is given to support the argument? (E.g., specific cases)
5. Are there alternative explanations discussed in the text?
 - a. If yes, what are they? How does the author disprove them?
 - b. If not, can you think of any from other papers we've read?
6. (Optional) What are your critiques of this text?

Example using Fearon (1995):

General reflection: This piece is an explanation for why states go to war. Fearon is making a neorealist argument, so he is closer to Mearsheimer (realist) than Wendt (constructivist) on the spectrum. He believes in anarchy, that security is zero-sum, and that states are rational. I think this argument is more plausible than Mearsheimer's, because it allows for more state agency (states can try to determine a bargaining range instead of going to war) than offensive realism would suggest. I think it could also subsume some constructivist arguments, if we assume that a state's bargaining range reflects its identity/preferences (although Fearon does not say this).

Unit of analysis: States (see footnote 1, unitary actor theory)

Main thesis: Rational states should almost never go to war, because there should almost always be a negotiated solution that both parties would prefer to war (war is costly/Pareto inefficient)

IV/DV: DV is war, IV is less clear, maybe state utilities + anarchy?

Mechanisms: Rational states may still go to war because of i) information problems (like incentives to misrepresent); ii) commitment problems; and iii) issue indivisibility (weakest)

Alternative explanations: Fearon disproves five pre-existing explanations: i) anarchy; ii) expected benefits exceed expected costs; iii) rational preventive war; iv) rational miscalculation due to lack of information; and v) rational miscalculation or disagreement about relative power

¹ Note that this was originally written for students in the class "War and Diplomacy" and thus is most relevant for academic reading in political science or other social sciences. The example also reflects this focus.