What is a scholarly publication?

A scholarly publication is an essay or book written to communicate the results of original research to a field of experts. This piece of writing is usually peer-reviewed, that is to say specialists in the field evaluate whether the essay or book in question is of sufficient quality and importance so as to merit publication, either by a journal or academic press. This is all to say that the author of a scholarly publication writes with the assumption that the audience is already aware of the principle issues, debates, and problems in a particular field of study. Given the specialist nature of such publications, please do not be alarmed if upon first reading you find the article confusing, arcane, puzzling, if not downright difficult. In art history lectures and seminars you will be assigned such pieces of writing such that you can begin to think like an art historian, in other words as one of a scholar’s peers. What follows are some steps that may help you navigate through the turbulent waters of scholarly prose and formulate an informed opinion about its significance.

1. **Begin from the ground up.**

   Rather than jumping into the article or book, you might want to consider what I like to call the skeletal structure of a publication, namely its footnotes and images. Do a sweep of the footnotes: are any of the publications, references, names, etc. familiar to you? If not, then anticipate that you may require some extra time to absorb its content. Look at the dates of the publication: is the scholarly literature cited relatively recent? Or are most of the references to primary sources themselves? (On primary sources, see the relevant handout on the website). On a sheet of paper (or on whatever electronic device), quickly jot down what impressions and assumptions you yourself bring to this topic at hand. Articulating what impressions you have formed will facilitate establishing a dialogue with the author.
As with the footnotes, please go through all the images. An art historian is like a cinematic director of sorts, arranging images and text in order to convey a narrative to the reader/viewer. Is there a visual pattern or argument you can discern just by following the sequence of images? Are you familiar with any of the images or the artists whose works are illustrated? Again write down your impressions regarding the nature of the image sequence selected by the author. If you find the selection to be arbitrary, note that down as well—this most likely means you will need to pay careful attention to the mode of argumentation the author has employed to bind a disparate selection of works into the framework of a publication.

For books, please spend at least 15 minutes going through the index. Many authors take great care to ensure that index contains and underscores certain key terms, historical figures, locations, and concepts. If a stream of numbers follows a particular entry in the index, please write down the term in your notes and anticipate paying some extra time to it.

2. Read the “bookends.”

As mentioned, think twice before diving into the article. After sweeping through the notes and images, read the publication’s “bookends,” that is to say its introduction and conclusion. These components are what Kensington or the 7th are to London and Paris, respectively: prime real estate areas. Authors polish and elaborate their introductions and conclusions as they know that the majority of readers will invest a greater proportion of their time and intellectual energy to these areas. Please, therefore, read the introduction and conclusion at least twice, once before the initial reading and finally after completion of the publication. As with the notes and images, jot down what assumptions or questions you have formed from reading these “bookends,” and see how reading the article itself corresponds to these initial impressions.

3. Then just read (and comment)…

I would be more than happy if I could impart some techniques to enable you to achieve 100% comprehension of the text with 20%
effort, or some such proportion of figures. In my experience, however, nothing replaces the hard work of reading, following an argument, and responding in kind. By all means, highlight, mark up, etc., but please be aware that reading, while enormously satisfying, requires energy and concentration. Budget sufficient time to read the text carefully, noting down the points of emphasis, claims, weaknesses, etc. You might begin a sort of dialogue with the author in the margins of the text. Comment and ask questions to the author in the form of written questions and observations. This technique turns the act of reading from a one-way to a two-way process, as it were. After you have completed the article, look over your comments and questions. Are there certain patterns you notice not only in the text, but in your own response? (These patterns often point out your own intellectual interests and personal points of entry into a text and scholarly debate. Do not discount them). Are there issues or claims which you feel the author has convincingly demonstrated? These questions lead us to our next point.

4. **Make a digest of the scholarly publication.**

A “digest” might answer the following questions (for graduate students, I recommend making such digests for each of the entries on bibliographies submitted to examination committees):

a) What is the author’s argument?
b) What sources were used in advancing the argument?
c) How were the sources used, i.e. to say what method was applied to the historical evidence?
d) What did you find beneficial, interesting, intriguing, inspiring, etc. in the article for your own knowledge about the subject and way of thinking?
e) What, if any, are the weaknesses of the publication? Do you disagree with any of the claims advanced? If so, why?

Please bring these summaries to class if reading for a seminar. If reading for a research, combine these digests into a narrative about the state of the field of research and how your contribution intervenes in the field.