

# Make your research papers easy to skim

Claus Metzner [asked us](#) how often we read research papers carefully. He reads fully less than 1% of all research papers he comes across. This must be true of nearly everyone. We read a few titles, fewer abstracts, even fewer introductions, we skim a few papers, but we rarely read entire papers carefully.

We could blame [information overload](#) and its academic companion: [publish or perish](#). However, when I read a research paper, most often, I only need to know the main contribution of the research paper. As Claus puts it:

I don't care too much if the arguments, methods and results of a paper are 100% sound or not.  
Mostly I am hunting for small reusable items

Hence, we should:

- Pick good titles giving away the main insight (“The Earth is round” and not “On the geometry of our planet”);
- Pick good section headers giving away the conclusions of the section (replace “Discussion” by “this drug fails to work”);
- Use bullet points to outline our results;
- Use simple schemas and figures.

Ultimately, we should write research papers expecting our readers to barely skim them.



[Comments \(2\)](#)

## 2 Comments

1. I strongly agree. Stupid titles like “Succincter” should be banned.



For theoretical papers, it is seriously worth the extra effort it takes to encapsulate your theorems instead of relying on context.

Some papers have figures that are arguably silly, just like Powerpoint slides. I think some people must feel that such figures aren't formal enough, but done right they can be fantastic for skimming.

*Comment by Jon — 28/5/2009 @ [9:08](#)*

2. Better figures and killer abstracts would go a long way in this regard.



*Comment by [Mr. Gunn](#) — 28/5/2009 @ [16:39](#)*

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