

Get to Know a Professor, Grad Student, or Post-Doc by Chatting up a Research Article

Purpose:

The University of Texas at Austin is one of the most highly rated public research universities in the nation. In the more than 3,500 active projects, researchers are making detailed studies of everything from how to control atoms more completely to how sports shape racial discourse. Every time that an article is published, at least one, and usually many people “get their name on the paper.” This includes professors, graduate students, post-docs, and even some undergraduates. Most of you will engage in undergraduate research during your time here, and a great way to find a research group on campus is by reading research articles and then talking to the people who wrote them. One purpose of this skill module is to help you explore your options and think about what you might be interested in doing.

Reading a research article can also be a great way to get to know one of your professors outside of class. As honors students, you will be taking classes with some of the most respected professors on the UT campus. Your professors are published, extremely intelligent and lead interesting, fun lives, but most importantly, they want to get to know you! Your professors are often a wealth of knowledge about their topics of interest and opportunities like research positions, study abroad, upper-division classes, other professors, graduate schools and scholarships. And if you get to know your professors, you can take advantage of all of this knowledge! All of your professors have office hours, and although this time is often used for questions specific to class, you can also use this time to get to know your professors and/or talk to your professors about questions you have related to the class or the subject in general. The other purpose of this skill module is to help you tap into this wealth of knowledge.

Therefore, this skill module has two purposes, and you can achieve one or the other or both. Either way, you need to read a research article on a topic that interests you written by a professor (whether you are in his or her class or not), a graduate student, or a post-doc at UT, and then go talk to them about the paper.

Task:

Look up specific professors and their research on campus, and pick one that looks the most interesting to you. Alternatively, look up a professor from a class you are really enjoying and see what his or her research deals with. Then do the following:

1. Find a recent publication from the lab, and read it thoroughly. Make note of all your questions and points you would like the person’s opinion on.
2. Think about:
 - a. How it relates to your personal academic interests
 - b. How it relates to the real world
 - c. How it relates to what you are currently studying in that class (if you are talking to a professor whose class you are taking)
 - d. How you would improve upon their idea in future experiments
3. Visit the lab and talk to someone (a graduate student, a post-doc, the actual professor) who was involved in the project described in the paper. You will want to pre-arrange a meeting time because these people can be quite busy. Be sure to do the background research beforehand, so you can ask thoughtful questions.

4. Finally write a one page summary, briefly describing the lab's research, the specific paper you read, why you choose this paper/lab, and what you learned during your visit.

Note: If you are unsure of how to find a research article, I recommend the "Learning to Use SciFinder Scholar" optional skill module or the Using Scholarly Databases section of the required skill module "Learning to use the general libraries at UT Austin." Also, if you are having trouble reading the article, I would recommend the "How to read an article in a scientific research journal" optional skill module.