

FREE RESEARCH GUIDE 2026

The SciSpace Toolkit

A practical guide to reading, reviewing, and citing research papers faster with AI — chat with PDFs, extract data across papers, and search by meaning instead of keywords.

6

Tools covered

5

Step reading workflow

5

Common mistakes to avoid

<https://scispace.com/?via=quang-bui>

Table of Contents

01	Why SciSpace — Reading Papers Faster With AI
02	Getting Started — Tools Inside SciSpace
03	Chat with PDF
04	Literature Review & Extract Data
05	Find Topics (Semantic Search)
06	Paraphraser & AI Detector
07	Citation Generator
08	A Fast Workflow for Reading a New Paper
09	Free vs Premium vs Advanced — When to Upgrade
10	Common Mistakes First-Time Users Make
11	Quick Reference Cheat Sheet

Why SciSpace — Reading Papers Faster With AI

The bottleneck in research usually isn't finding papers — it's reading them. A single dense methods section can take 20 minutes to parse, especially outside your core specialty, where unfamiliar terminology slows you down more than the actual complexity of the idea.

SciSpace is built around one core idea: let you ask a paper questions directly, instead of reading it end to end. Upload a PDF, highlight a confusing paragraph, and get a plain-language explanation with the original citation still linked — so you can verify the AI's answer against the actual source in seconds.

9.6M+

Researchers worldwide

10,000+

Citation styles supported

2016

Founded, by former academic researchers

WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

Students and researchers who spend real time reading papers outside their core specialty, and want to cut that time down without skipping the parts that matter.

This guide walks through every core tool with a real example, ends with a fast reading workflow you can reuse on any new paper, and covers the mistakes that waste people's free-tier usage in the first week.

Getting Started — Tools Inside SciSpace

SciSpace isn't one single feature — it's a set of tools you reach for depending on the task at hand. You don't need to learn all of them on day one; most people start with Chat with PDF and add the others as a real need comes up.

Tool	Best for
Chat with PDF	Asking direct questions to a paper you've uploaded
Literature Review	Extracting and comparing data across many papers at once
Find Topics	Question-based search across the paper database
Paraphraser	Rewriting a passage without changing its meaning
AI Detector	Checking whether text reads as AI-generated
Citation Generator	Formatting references in the style you need

What the Free plan actually gives you

A free account gets you daily-limited Chat with PDF access and basic AI actions — enough to fully test the workflow on one real paper you're currently reading before deciding whether to upgrade. There's no credit card required to start.

First 10 minutes: a concrete starting checklist

- Pick the single most confusing paper on your current reading list — not an easy one — and upload it first.
- Ask one narrow, specific question before asking for a general summary, so you can judge answer quality against something you can verify.
- Try the Chrome extension on a paper you find mid-browse, outside the main app, to see how the workflow feels without a deliberate upload step.
- If you're mid-literature-review, upload 3-4 related papers together and try the Literature Review tool before evaluating single-paper Chat with PDF alone.

Chat with PDF

Upload any paper and ask it questions directly — get plain-language answers linked back to the exact passage in the source PDF, so you're never taking the AI's word for it without a way to check.

TRY ASKING

"What sample size did they use, and was the study properly powered?"

WHAT YOU GET BACK

n = 214 participants. Power analysis reported in Section 2.3, page 4 — cited directly from the source paragraph.

How to use it well

- Ask narrow, specific questions rather than "summarize this paper" — you'll get more useful, checkable answers, and it's easier to verify against the linked source passage.
- Use it to jump straight to the limitations section of a paper before deciding whether the rest is worth a full read.
- When a term is unfamiliar, ask for a plain-language explanation in context rather than looking it up separately — the answer will be scoped to how the paper actually uses it.

COMMON MISTAKE

Pasting an entire dense paper and asking a single broad question like "what does this paper say?" You'll get a shallow summary. Narrow, specific questions produce far more useful, verifiable answers.

Literature Review & Extract Data

When you're working through a stack of papers rather than just one, Literature Review pulls structured data — methods, sample sizes, key findings — into a comparable table across all of them, saving the manual work of building that table yourself paper by paper.

GIVE IT A SET OF PAPERS

"Extract sample size, intervention length, and primary outcome from these 6 papers."

WHAT IT BUILDS

A structured comparison table with one row per paper, ready to export as CSV or paste into your own manuscript draft.

Getting reliable results

- Use it to build a first-pass comparison table before writing your literature review section by hand — it's a starting point, not a finished product.
- Spot-check extracted numbers against the source paper — automated extraction can misread tables with unusual formatting or footnoted values.
- Export results (CSV/RIS) rather than retyping into your own reference manager or spreadsheet.

Find Topics (Semantic Search)

Instead of keyword search, Find Topics lets you search by describing what you're looking for in plain language — useful when you don't know the exact terminology a field uses for a concept you're chasing.

DESCRIBE WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

"Studies looking at how sleep deprivation affects decision-making under risk in young adults"

WHAT COMES BACK

Semantically relevant papers surfaced even if they use different terms like "sleep restriction" or "risk-taking behavior" instead of your exact phrasing.

When to use it vs a traditional database

- Good for the "I know the idea but not the jargon" stage of a literature search, especially when starting in an unfamiliar subfield.
- Still cross-check with a traditional database (PubMed, Google Scholar) for systematic reviews — semantic search prioritizes relevance over exhaustiveness, which matters for completeness-sensitive work like a PRISMA review.

Paraphraser & AI Detector

The paraphraser rewrites a passage while preserving its meaning — useful for varying repetitive phrasing across a long document. The AI Detector checks whether a passage reads as AI-generated, useful as a self-check before submission.

Practical uses

- Rewrite a passage flagged by a similarity checker without changing the underlying claim or data — but remember this doesn't remove the need to cite the original source.
- Vary repetitive sentence openings across a long literature review draft.
- Run the AI Detector on your own writing before submission if your target journal screens for AI-generated content, so you know what a reviewer's tool might flag.

CAUTION

Paraphrasing a source's idea doesn't remove the need to cite it. Rewording text is not the same as making a claim your own — this is a common misunderstanding among first-time academic writers.

Citation Generator

Generate and reformat citations without retyping them by hand — paste a DOI or title and get a correctly formatted reference in whichever style your target journal requires.

PASTE A DOI OR TITLE

"10.1126/science.abc1234"

AUTO-FORMATTED CITATION

Chen, L. et al. (2022). Semantic search methods for scientific literature. *Science*, 375(6580), 512-518.

- Reformat an entire reference list in one pass when switching target journals after a rejection.
- Cross-check auto-generated citations against the actual source for edge cases — preprints, conference papers, and datasets are the most common source of formatting errors.

A Fast Workflow for Reading a New Paper

Step	What to do	Tool used
1. Upload	Drop the PDF into Chat with PDF instead of opening it cold.	Chat with PDF
2. Orient	Ask for a one-paragraph summary of the research question and method.	Chat with PDF
3. Interrogate	Ask specific questions about anything unclear — stats, terminology, figures.	Chat with PDF
4. Extract	If comparing multiple papers, pull key data into a table.	Literature Review
5. Cite	Generate the citation in your target style before you move on.	Citation Generator

Run this same five-step sequence on every new paper and it stops feeling like a special workflow — it just becomes how you read.

Free vs Premium vs Advanced — When to Upgrade

	Free	Premium	Advanced
Price	\$0	\$12/mo (annual)	\$70/mo (annual)
Agent usage	Limited daily	1,200 credits/mo	10,000 credits/mo
Model access	Standard	Pro model	Expert model
Parallel queries	1	4	8
Best for	Trying it out	Regular research use	Heavy / expert workflows

Start on the free plan for a real paper you're currently reading. Upgrade to Premium once you're using Chat with PDF and Literature Review weekly rather than occasionally — the 1,200 monthly credits comfortably cover regular use without watching a counter.

Common Mistakes First-Time Users Make

- **Asking broad questions instead of specific ones.** "Summarize this" gives a shallow answer — a specific question about a method, stat, or claim gives a checkable one.
- **Not verifying extracted data against the source.** Automated table extraction is a first pass, not a final answer — spot-check numbers before citing them yourself.
- **Relying only on semantic search for a systematic review.** Pair it with a traditional database search when completeness matters, not just relevance.
- **Burning free-tier credits on papers you'll only skim once.** Save Chat with PDF sessions for papers you'll genuinely reference, not every tab you have open.
- **Treating the paraphraser as a citation substitute.** Reworded text still needs a citation if the underlying idea isn't yours.

Quick Reference

- **Confused by a section?** → Chat with PDF, ask a specific question
- **Comparing many papers?** → Literature Review / Extract Data
- **Don't know the right search terms?** → Find Topics
- **Text feels repetitive?** → Paraphraser
- **Switching citation style?** → Citation Generator

READY TO START

Try SciSpace: <https://scispace.com/?via=quang-bui>

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