

How to Read.

You might wonder why anyone at this relatively late date in your education would suggest that you learn how to read. As an English major, you're probably already fairly adept at deciphering written texts. But most students start (and many finish) their college careers with woefully inadequate reading strategies for wrestling with advanced academic writing. (A few years ago, the *New Yorker* reported that according to the U.S. Department of Education, just 13% percent of the population is "proficient" at reading—i.e. "capable of such tasks as 'comparing viewpoints in two editorials.'")

Below, then, is some commonsense advice for handling the more sophisticated reading assignments you can expect at the college level—and not only in English classes, either. Still, the strategies outlined here should help you make your way through the kinds of critical articles that you'll tackle as you move through the major, especially in pursuing the research you undertake for your own papers.

Some basic tenets of active reading:

You won't necessarily want to employ *all* of these strategies for every reading assignment; let the difficulty of the material (and its importance to you) be your guide.

- First and most important, *always* keep a pen or pencil and notebook with you when you read, and **USE THEM**. Force yourself to write in your texts; you wouldn't let a friend talk for twenty minutes without answering back, and you shouldn't let a writer talk at you without the same kinds of questions and commentary.
- Be prepared to slow down. Good readers are not fast readers. Active reading takes time, but it pays off in the long run, because your comprehension is greater and you ultimately retain more of what you've read.
- Keep a dictionary nearby and **USE IT**. Be honest with yourself, and don't simply rely on context for meaning. If you know you don't know a particular word, look it up. If the first dictionary you refer to isn't helpful, try the *Oxford English Dictionary* (on the "databases" page of the library's website)—and/or consider whether the word might have some more specialized meaning in the context of literary criticism or theory and look it up in a good handbook of literary terms.
- Review, review, review—even as you're reading. For instance: read two pages, then go back and reread the same material, quickly, to get a better sense of how individual paragraphs relate to each other and fit together in the service of the writer's broader argument. Make yourself try to capture the gist of the section in a sentence or two, then double-check to make sure you've gotten it accurately.
- Question the material as you read. Ask yourself, "what does this contribute to the overall argument? Why did the writer say this?" Just as you do when you read a lyric poem, put yourself in the place of the writer, and ask yourself: what prompted this utterance? What is this particular idea doing here? Why is she saying it *now*?
- Look consciously for the rhetorical cues and signposts that make the logic of a passage explicit—transitional flags like "however," "nevertheless," "indeed," and so on; changes in verbal mood (to the conditional, for instance: "it could, of course, be true that . . ."); explicit references to the text's organization ("there are three possible explanations for these responses . . ."); figurative uses of language (irony, understatement, etc.), and so on.

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- Develop a *system* for note-taking and highlighting so that they will be more effective as tools for review:
 - Highlighting/underlining: don't rely on intuition, highlighting "ideas that jump out at you"; there's a good chance you won't remember later why you found a particular idea striking at that moment. And don't highlight indiscriminately; some people highlight more than half of their texts, which is pretty useless.

Instead, use highlighting/underlining to pick out the main ideas or the topic sentences of individual paragraphs, and try to highlight *no more than 10%* of a text. If you highlight judiciously, you can get a good summary of the essay just by reviewing the sentences you underlined. This also forces you to pose the sorts of questions to the text that I mentioned above; in order to decide what to underline, you need to actively assess each paragraph and figure out what it boils down to, why the writer included it, how it fits into a larger argument. *Wait* to underline until you review; reading the paragraph in the context of its surrounding paragraphs will help you identify the overall line of reasoning the writer is pursuing.

- Use notes and marginal comments to contribute your own two cents to the discussion. It does little good just to underline a passage you object to or don't understand (or to put a question mark next to it in the margin); instead, you should force yourself to write out your questions and reactions, to articulate them in a way you'll be able to understand when you return to the text later.

Marginal comments and notes can and should include all sorts of things: a summary of a particular passage in a text; dictionary definitions of unfamiliar vocabulary; your objections to an assertion made by the writer (my texts are full of rude marginal remarks); personal insights or clarifications that relate an idea to something you saw elsewhere (e.g., "this sounds like something Northrop Frye would say"); alternative readings that refute the writer or additional evidence that supports the writer; etc.

- If you're really stumped by some part of a reading assignment, try to figure out why. Is it the sentence structure itself—pronouns with unclear antecedents, bizarre verb moods or tenses, inverted syntax, etc.? Are individual sentences clear, but not the logic that holds them together; i.e., do sentences read as *non sequiturs*? Does the writer assume a level of expertise that you just don't possess—are there specialized terms you haven't seen before or concepts you're unfamiliar with? The more you hash out the nature and source of your problems, the more help your instructor can give when you go to him/her with your difficulties. And the instructor will undoubtedly be impressed by your efforts to diagnose your own difficulties.