

## Making the Most of Your Reading (or: How to Read)

You might wonder why anyone at this relatively late date in your education would suggest that you need to learn how to read. As an English major, you're probably already fairly adept at deciphering written texts. But many of the texts that you'll grapple with, particularly in upper-division courses, will require more than the garden-variety reading techniques that have served you reasonably well till now. They often presume you know more than you do (in other words, you weren't the audience the writers had in mind); they may pursue complex and seemingly contradictory lines of reasoning (which means you have to be particularly attentive to different logical flags that signal the rhetorical purposes of various passages); they may employ subtle shifts in tone and levels of discourse (making it difficult to tell, for instance, when a writer is speaking in her voice and when she is summarizing and/or criticizing someone else's argument); and at the level of basic syntax, they may confront you with labyrinthine sentences the beginning of which you've forgotten by the time you reach the end.

Below, then, is some commonsense advice for handling the more sophisticated reading assignments you can expect at the college level—and not just in English classes, either. The strategies outlined here should help you make your way through the kinds of critical articles that you'll tackle in the weeks ahead, and if you mark up your texts and keep notes as you read, you'll find you're already prepared to sit down and discuss those essays when the time comes, and the Response to A Critical Essay assignment will be that much easier to handle.

### Some basic tenets of active reading:

You won't necessarily want to employ *all* of these strategies for every reading assignment you're faced with, or even for every paragraph of every assignment; let the difficulty of the material 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 uninterrupted, and you shouldn't let a writer talk at you without interjecting the same kinds of questions and comments.
- 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 the assignment.
- Keep a dictionary nearby and **USE IT**. Be honest with yourself, and don't rely on context (or worse, your hunches) 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 print or online handbook of literary terms or critical theory. If, for instance, you're reading an essay that refers repeatedly to Michel Foucault and to "genealogy," then you might want to find out what *Foucault* meant by "genealogy" (he wasn't exactly a Mormon).
- Review, review, review—even as you're reading. For instance: read through 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 overall argument. Make yourself try to capture the gist of the section in a sentence or two, then double-check and correct for accuracy as you go along. You may be amazed at how much more you get out of earlier paragraphs when you read them again in light of what follows.

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- Question the material as you read. Ask yourself, “what does this contribute to the overall thesis? 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 help make the logic of a passage more explicit—transitional flags like “however,” “nevertheless,” “indeed,” and so on; changes in 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.
- Develop a consistent *system* for note-taking and highlighting so that they’ll 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. And don’t highlight indiscriminately; some people highlight more than half of their texts, which sort of defeats the purpose.

Instead, use highlighting/underlining to pick out the main ideas or the topic sentences of individual paragraphs. Try to highlight *no more than 10-15%* of a text. If you highlight conservatively and judiciously, you can get a good summary of an 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, and how it fits into a broader line of reasoning. *Wait* to underline until you review, then; after all, how can you know what the main idea of a paragraph is until you see how it functions within some sort of context?

- 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 as specifically as possible, and 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 will be when you go to him/her with your difficulties. And the instructor will undoubtedly be impressed by your efforts to diagnose your own difficulties.