

College Reading Strategies

This handout focuses on strategies that are generally useful for reading non-fiction texts or for preparing for class discussion or to write about a text. It doesn't cover all of the specialized purposes and approaches to reading in every course you'll take or for every kind of text. However, the strategies below are good habits to start.

Before Reading

- **Preview the Text**
 - Read the title. It's usually a hint from the author about the main idea of the text.
 - Learn the author's name. Picture the author as an actual person talking to you across space and time.
 - Identify the genre.
 - Scan subheadings to get a sense of the length and structure.
 - First read the abstract, figures, introduction, and conclusion...then read the whole text, start to finish.
- **Reflect on Purpose**
 - The reader:
 - Why am I reading? For information or understanding? To analyze the structure or content? To agree or disagree with the argument?
 - How will I use the text? E.g., to write a paper, participate in or lead a class discussion, present a summary?
 - The course: Did my professor say anything about this reading assignment in class? How does this assignment relate to the previous day's reading or the theme of the current unit? If more than one reading was assigned, how do they relate to each other? How might this reading connect to the goals of the course or major questions we're exploring? Why might my professor have picked this reading?
 - The text: What is the author's purpose? To inform, persuade, entertain? Who is the intended audience?
- **Tap into Your Background Knowledge.** What do I already know about this topic? What are my beliefs and preconceptions about the topic? How was this topic discussed in my family, country, or other social or cultural contexts I'm familiar with? What do I know already about this type of text?
- **Evaluate the Source.** Is the source scholarly or popular? Is it peer-reviewed? Does the author seem qualified? Is the information from reliable sources? Is it up-to-date? Is the source biased?

Annotating While Reading

- Highlight/underline key sentences and phrases in the text.
- Interact with the text by keeping track of opinions, questions, reactions, and associations.
- Flag key terms.
- Flag unfamiliar vocabulary or allusions to unfamiliar names, places, works, or ideas. Choose no more than 2-4 to look up before class—it's inefficient to look up every single word you don't know. Some meanings may be inferred based on context.

Strategies for Basic Comprehension

- **Get the Gist**
 - Summarize the main idea of the text in your own words. Paraphrasing helps to externalize your understanding.
 - Write a sentence that identifies what each paragraph says. Is the logic of the writer's organization apparent? Does the arrangement build an argument or develop a topic? What do the paragraphs add up to?
- **Connect** the content to your prior knowledge or experience. What examples can I think of from my own life? How does what the author is saying affect me or the communities I'm part of?

More Advanced Reading Strategies

- **Responding**
 - What are your initial reactions? Describe both intellectual and emotional reactions. Identify places in the text that caused you to react as you did.
 - What accounts for your reaction? Do you agree or disagree? Why? Are your reactions rooted in personal experience, particular beliefs, or positions or a philosophy that you adhere to?
 - What do you find puzzling, confusing, or interesting about the text? What questions or problems does it raise in your mind, and what are some possible answers or solutions?
 - Reflect on your experience of reading or watching the text. How did you feel? What in particular evoked those feelings? Why did you feel that way? Why are those feelings significant?
 - What ideas, beliefs, claims, or values are expressed within the text? Do these ideas complement or conflict with your own? Did the text change or confirm your views?
 - Which perspective in the text aligns with your lived world experience? In other words, do you identify with a particular character or author or intended audience? Which perspective is the most different from yours?
 - What does the text imply or assume? What is your opinion of those implications or assumptions?
- **Reading like a writer:** Analyze the writer's choices (structure, organization, word choice, evidence, etc.) by considering your response as a reader and how you might make the same or different choices in your own writing. Use class readings as models of how to create understanding through writing (or lack thereof). How does the author organize the piece? How are transitions made? What is the rhetorical structure of the text? Or, in other words, how does the structure enable communication of the argument? Identify the function of each paragraph. What does the paragraph do? How does it relate to the main idea?
- **Analyzing argument.** What is the claim? What support does the writer offer for the claim? What types of evidence are used? What sources does the writer use and how does the writer use them in the argument? Is the argument effective? Does the writer address and respond to counterarguments? Who does the writer seem to imagine as the reader? What's at stake in the argument? What does the writer expect the reader to do after reading the text or how will the reader be changed?
- Temporarily **adopting** someone else's argument to understand their perspective. List or free-write as many reasons as you can think of for believing what the writer says and then as many as you can think of for doubting it.
- **Identifying the conversation:** Who else cares about the argument? Does the text refer to concepts or ideas that give you a sense it's part of a larger conversation? Is there any terminology or specialized language that reflects

the writer's allegiance to a particular group or academic discipline? Whom does the writer cite? Do the writers have a particular academic specialty or belong to an identifiable school of thought or share political leanings?

When the Text is Especially Challenging

- Reflect on what exactly is challenging. A lack of prior knowledge that the text seems to demand? Unfamiliar vocabulary or unrecognizable genre/discipline (conventions)? Self-awareness is the first step to solving the problem.
- Keep track of questions and confusing passages so that you can ask your professor or share them during class discussion. Professors want to know what confuses you and why so they can clarify for you.
- Modeling: Listen to someone else's thought process--the possible ideas they have, the questions they ask themselves, etc.--as they attempt to comprehend a text.
- Look up published summaries or find translations of the work into your first language. But be sure to critically examine other readers' summaries rather than treating them as gospel.

Works Consulted

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