

5 Reading Habits that Will Help You in College and Beyond

Adapted from Susan Gilroy, “Interrogating Texts”

Critical reading – engagement and interaction with texts – is essential to your academic success at college and to your intellectual growth. Research has shown that students who read deliberately retain more information and retain it longer. As you advance in your particular program of study, reading assignment will probably increase in length and become more sophisticated. College students rarely have the time to read a text multiple times before discussing it in their discussion sections and seminars

The following list provides strategies to get the most out of your initial reading of a text. While the strategies below are listed sequentially, you can probably do most of them simultaneously. They may feel awkward at first, and you may have to deploy them very consciously, but they will quickly become habits, and you will notice the difference in what you “see” in a reading, and in the confidence with which you approach texts.

1. **Previewing: Look “around” the text before you start reading.**

Probably the most common version of previewing is the act of determining how long an assigned reading is (and how much time and energy, as a result, it will demand from us). But you can learn a great deal more about the organization and purpose of a text by taking note of features in addition to its length. **Previewing** enables you to develop a set of *expectations about the scope and aim* of the text. These very preliminary impressions offer you a way to focus your reading. For instance:

- What does the presence of *headnotes*, an *abstract*, or other *prefatory material* tell you? Is the author known to you already? If so, how does his or her **reputation** or **credentials** influence your perception of what you are about to read? If the author is unfamiliar or unknown, does an editor introduce him or her (by supplying brief biographical information, an assessment of the author’s work, concerns, and importance)?
- How does the disposition or *layout of a text* prepare you for reading? Is the material broken into parts--subtopics, sections, or the like? Are there long and unbroken blocks of text or smaller paragraphs or “chunks” and what does this suggest? How might the parts of a text guide you toward understanding the line of inquiry or the arc of the argument that's being made?
- Does the text seem to follow *certain conventions of the discourse to which it belongs*? Examples of discourses are newspaper or journal articles, argumentative essays, novels, books of philosophy, etc. Novels, for instance, are often broken into chapters that define episodes in a narrative. Newspaper articles usually have a dateline and tend to report the most essential information first and leave details for last. You can often spot a fairytale or fable by its opening line: “Once upon a time...” Texts demand different things of you as you read, so whenever you can, try to pinpoint the *type* of text you’re presented with. However, keep in mind that authors can defy the expectations of their discourse or genre. Instances of such transgression would be something to call attention to in your **annotations**.

2. Annotating: Make your reading thinking-intensive from start to finish.

Annotating puts you actively and immediately in a *dialogue with an author and the issues and ideas you encounter* in a written text. It's also a way to have an ongoing conversation with yourself as you move through the text and to record what that encounter was like for you. Here's how:

- ***Throw away your highlighter:*** Highlighting can seem like an active reading strategy, but it can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. Those bright yellow lines you put on a printed page one day can seem mysterious and cryptic the next unless you have a method for remembering why they were important to you in the first place. Pen or pencil will allow you to do more to a text than merely emphasize some parts over others.
- ***Mark up the margins of your text with words and phrases:*** ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or **course themes**. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the **reasons** you are reading as well as the **purpose** your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a test or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.
- ***Develop your own system of symbols:*** asterisk (*) a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point (!) for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. Reserve a question mark (?) for the confusing or strange. Your personalized set of hieroglyphs allow you to capture the important – and often fleeting – insights that occur to you as are reading. Like notes in your margins, they will prove indispensable when you return to a text in search of that perfect passage to use in a paper or are preparing for a big exam.
- ***Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions:*** “What does this mean?” “Why is the writer drawing that conclusion?” “Why am I being asked to read this text?” etc. Write the questions down (in your margins, at the beginning or end of the reading, in a notebook, or elsewhere. They are reminders of the **unfinished business** you still have with a text: something to **ask during class** discussion, or to come to terms with on your own, once you have had a chance to digest the material further or have done other course reading.

3. Outline, summarize, analyze

Take the information apart, look at its parts, and then try to put it back together again in language that is meaningful to you. The best way to determine that you've really gotten the point is to be able to state it in your own words.

- **Outlining** the argument of a text is a version of annotating, and can be done quite informally in the margins of the text, unless you prefer a more formal structure that charts an argument using a hierarchical system of
 - I. roman numerals
 - A. letters
 1. and numbers.

Outlining enables you to see the skeleton of an argument: the thesis, the first point and evidence (and so on), through the conclusion. With long and/or difficult readings, the skeleton may not be obvious until you go looking for it.

- **Summarizing** accomplishes something similar, but in sentence and paragraph form, and with the connections between ideas made explicit. Summarizing is particularly helpful when you want to master the details of an argument because it requires you to put the author's argument into your own words.
- **Analyzing** adds an evaluative component to the summarizing process—it requires you not just to restate main ideas, but also to test the logic, credibility, and emotional impact of an argument. In analyzing a text, you reflect upon and decide how effectively (or poorly) its argument has been made. Questions to ask:
 - What is the writer asserting?
 - What am I being asked to believe or accept? Facts? Opinions? Some mixture?
 - What reasons or evidence does the author supply to convince me? Where is the strongest or most effective evidence the author offers -- and why is it compelling?
 - Does the evidence provided match the claims being made? Does the author's interpretation of the evidence make sense to you?

4. Look for repetitions and patterns

The way *language is chosen, used, positioned in a text* can be important indication of what an author considers crucial and what they expect you to glean from his argument. It can also alert you to ideological positions, hidden agendas and biases, or poetic visions. Be on the lookout for:

- Recurring images
- Repeated words, phrases, types of examples, or illustrations
- Consistent ways of characterizing people, events, or issues
- A consistent or changing relationship between what is being described and the form of the language used (*how*)? Are the words chosen such that their meaning seems at odds with the author's intentions (irony) or is the tone urgently sincere?

5. Contextualize

Once you've finished reading actively and annotating, *take stock for a moment and put it in perspective*. When you contextualize, you essentially *re-view a text you've encountered, framed by its historical, cultural, material, or intellectual circumstances*.

- **Historical context:** When was it written or where was it published? Do these factors change or otherwise influence how you view a piece? Also view the reading through the lens of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is always shaped by what you have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place.
- **Compare and Contrast:** Set course readings against each other to determine their relationships (hidden or explicit). At what point in the term does this reading com and why? How does it contribute to the main concepts and themes of the course? How does it compare to the ideas presented by texts that come before it? Does it continue a trend, shift direction, or expand the focus of previous readings?
- How has your thinking been altered by this reading? How has it affected your response to the issues and themes of the course?