

On Reading Practices

Here are some general tips that I hope will help you read more successfully.

1. **Set your goals:** Know why you're reading the text, what your stakes are, and what you want to get out of it. Be realistic.
2. **Get a sense of the structure of the text:** Find the introduction and the conclusion, use the table of contents, look for any headings etc. Know what awaits you. Also see how you can break the text up into manageable chunks.
3. **Don't feel like you have to read linearly:** You might find it useful to read the introduction, and then the conclusion, and any section summaries, and then keep going back to those to re-orient yourself.
4. **Don't be afraid to skip some parts:** If you're really struggling with something, move on. You can always come back, or you might just put a big question mark next to it and ask about it in class. Yes, you want to understand the reading, but also be realistic about the text and the time you have.
5. **Take a break if you're losing focus:** It is not easy to stay engaged for long periods of time. You might only be able to get through a few pages, or even few paragraphs at a time. That's OK.
6. **Pause and think about the text:** After each section, before you take a break, and especially after you finish reading, take a bit of time (maybe as little as 30-60 seconds) and see if you can quickly summarize what you just read.
7. **Identify the argument:** What is the main argument? How do you know? What is the author writing for or against? Who is the audience? What do you think is the purpose of the text? Why?
8. **Trace different levels of argument:** How is the author making his/her argument? What is the author doing in individual sections, and how does that relate to the main argument? Sometimes the authors will be very helpful and tell you all this—keep going back to where they do. Prioritize larger points the author makes and do not beat yourself up if you're not grasping all the details.
9. **Trace the concepts the author is using:** What are they? How is he/she using them? Are they defined in the text? Which ones do you understand and which ones do you not? Be careful, sometimes you will encounter familiar words, but the author will use them in a different way.
10. **Trace the 'speakers' and the tone:** In some texts, you might lose track of where a particular argument is coming from (the author or someone author is critiquing?) or what the author's opinion is (are they making a point or making fun of one?). This will happen very easily if you're not reading carefully. Keep an eye out for the rhetorical moves the author is making.

11. **Read with a pen or a pencil:** Highlighting isn't very informative, and you can easily end up highlighting large chunks of text. Write notes as you go, circle key words, underline few key sentences. If you prefer it that way, note things in your notebook. Sometimes you really should do so even if it you usually don't (for example if you want to chart out an argument, or draw a graph).
12. **Use the whole page when taking notes:** There's a lot of space on a page, and you can use all of it. You might even want to develop a system. I generally track points in the text on the outer margins, make affective comments in the inner margins, leave the top of the page for really big ideas, and then write questions on the bottom. See what works for you.
13. **Find ways to stay engaged:** Difficult texts can be really frustrating and boring and you might have to get creative in order to get through them. You'll probably have to find your own strategies but the following have helped me keep my focus on the text: pretending to have a conversation with the author (including writing down the wow's, no way's etc.), pretending you're editing the text (also a useful exercise that will help you write better, and catch many typos), pretending it's all just one big riddle (sometimes I'm pretty sure it is).