

Reading Strategies

Reading can be viewed as a dynamic activity that produces meaningful knowing. Each of you can read well if you have the patience and determination to do so. This handout has been prepared in order to assist you in reading the challenging material you will encounter in your college classes.

About prereading, reading, and postreading

One of the most important things you need to understand about yourself as a reader is that your prior knowledge and experiences are indispensable for the production of meaningful interpretations. Each of you has a distinctive cultural, educational, and personal background that influences the way you read and interpret texts. Your background should be viewed as an asset, not a detriment, to your potential as a reader. All of us have at least five resources in our backgrounds that we can draw upon for an interpretive reading:

- our recollections of past experiences and cultural events
- our current observations of life and culture
- our ideas gathered from other kinds of reading material
- our insights put together from class discussions and other conversations
- our imaginative and creative responses to the situations and characters represented in the texts we are reading about

When you associate fresh ideas encountered in your college readings with previously formed ideas, you should find it easier to read new and different materials both academically and imaginatively.

Another thing that you should glean about reading is that an interpretive "grid" is often essential for the production of coherent meanings. Interpretive grids are often supplied by the "lingo" of whatever subject one is studying. For instance, in a music appreciation class, musical terms provide an interpretive grid. In a chemistry class, atomic numbers and valences for individual elements provide an interpretive grid. During your academic studies, you will become acquainted with several interpretive grids, or critical approaches, which should help you express your ideas about a specific text.

A third thing that you should come to understand about reading is that it is an active process that, to be as successful as possible, requires conscious and strategic thinking. These activities can be loosely grouped together as prereading, reading, and postreading strategies. Please read over the ensuing groupings and identify the kinds of strategies that best describe your personal reading style. The key to this exercise is to discover what strategies work well for you, as well as what techniques you might like to try in the future, in order to help you become a more proficient reader.

As you read over these groupings of thinking strategies, remember that the categories are fluid, not fixed. In other words, you may need to regroup these strategies to describe your reading process more accurately. Additionally, you might employ certain reading strategies that have not been included in these groupings. Moreover, keep in mind that you might use different strategies for different kinds of reading assignments. One of the survival skills we learn in college is to read according to varying purposes, situations, audiences, and constraints. In this connection, you might want to contrast the kinds of thinking that go into a personal reading session with those required by an academic one. Furthermore, realize that reading is a recursive and referential process, not a linear or step-by-step activity. You may find yourself going back and forth between strategies. The point to keep in mind is to reinforce for yourself those strategies that are most helpful to you when faced with a reading assignment in one of your classes.

It might be helpful for you to keep a journal as you read. Some people prefer notecards. Regardless of method, organizing a lot of material is essential for writing a successful research paper. Be sure to interact with both primary and secondary texts: underline, highlight, make notes in the margin--whatever you have to do to "work" the material and mark it in a way that will allow easy access when it comes time to discuss, study, or write about the text. Here are some additional strategies that will help you understand the material.

Prereading strategies

- focusing and concentrating your attention on the title and the topic
- searching your background for prior knowledge
- surveying the text and making a survey map
- predicting what the author might say
- forming some questions in your mind
- identifying and defining difficult vocabulary
- deciding why the material is important and valuable to you
- staying open to new developments
- asking questions about the material
- getting some background information about the topic from a person or another source
- setting up a comfort zone (ritual, place, time, note paper, writing utensils)
- preparing your mind (discussing plans, keeping a notebook handy, getting notes out, having source material nearby, dealing with distractions, getting rid of excuses, concentrating on ideas)

Reading strategies

- locating the major ideas in the text

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- analyzing the format and the organization of ideas
- analyzing supporting details
- continuing to identify important words and their meanings
- studying any visual material
- analyzing and rewriting difficult sentences
- underlining thoughtfully and selectively
- beginning in the middle
- nutshelling main ideas
- reading the conclusion or appendices first
- making some marginal notes
- stopping occasionally to check your comprehension
- reading to the end, without stopping, to get a sense of the whole and some of the ideas
- visualizing the events and people you are reading about
- taking short breaks
- changing activities to get a fresh perspective

Postreading strategies

- surveying, as a review, when you have finished reading
- repeating to yourself what you have learned
- reading the material again, aloud if it helps
- locating words you don't understand and writing their meanings in the margins
- writing the main point of each paragraph in the margin
- summarizing, in your own words, each section of the material
- writing a summary, in your own words, of the entire piece
- talking with someone (another student, tutor, teaching assistant, or instructor) to clarify ideas
- analyzing formal conventions of the source text
- quizzing another student, and having that student quiz you
- making an idea or "theme" map of the reading material
- outlining the major ideas, plot events, characters, and so on
- thinking at length about a key term, concept, problem, character, and so on
- freewriting about a key term, concept, problem, character, and so on, for a set time
- asking a reporter's questions (who? What? Where? When? Why? How?)
- seeking out characters' or an author's motives
- building a dramatic pentad (what was done? Who did it? What means did the person use to make it happen? Where and when did the act happen and in what circumstances? What could have made the person do it?)
- imagining giving a speech about the literary piece
- tape-recording major insights
- comparing and contrasting assigned literary works with others
- identifying causes and effects in the material
- looking purposively for metaphors
- interpreting and analyzing the author's purpose for writing
- examining the occasion for writing
- speculating about the author's underlying assumptions and beliefs
- researching the author's allusions to other events and works
- understanding the connotative meanings of words
- seeking for similes
- making inferences about unstated meanings
- recognizing irony
- noticing controversies in the author's point of view
- investigating any figurative language and imagery
- acknowledging your own point of view
- recognizing persuasion
- analyzing and evaluating the method of reasoning
- thinking about the relationships among the ideas, events, and characters in the piece
- analyzing the author's balance between fact and fantasy, reality and imagination, truth and opinion.
- understanding the author's use of emotional material
- imagining the audience the author had in mind
- analyzing the author's inclusion of evidence and supporting details
- recognizing faulty reasoning
- evaluating the conclusion of the work
- associating the reading with literature you have read before
- challenging existing ideas
- thinking outside usual boundaries and patterns
- applying ideas to new situations.
- getting additional information from other sources
- reaching your own conclusions
- deciding what you think about and how you value the worth of your conclusions

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