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# CRITICAL READING

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## Learning Objectives

- Explain the differences between reading in general and college-level reading
- Apply strategies for critically reading a text
- Apply strategies for reading online

## Reading in College

Even though not everyone reads books or scholarly articles on a regular basis, we all read every day. Most of us read some form of social media, and most jobs require extensive reading. Some of us (but not many, according to studies) read for pleasure. Even though we employ the same basic strategies whenever we read, we read differently depending on our reason for reading. Reading for entertainment is different than reading a set of instructions. Reading in the waiting room of a doctor's office is not the same as reading about different vacation destinations. And the kind of reading you do in college classes is most likely *not* like the reading you do outside of college.

College professors assign texts for different reasons, but they almost always want you to learn from reading. For example, your professor wants you to learn key concepts presented in the course textbooks—concepts that may be covered only briefly or not at all in class. If you don't read the assigned chapters in a textbook carefully and determine which ideas your professor wants you to understand, your learning and therefore your grade may suffer.

When your professor assigns a major writing assignment, such as summarizing or analyzing a text, you'll need to read very carefully, too. When professors ask students to summarize a text, they expect to see that you have read it carefully enough to articulate the main points. An analysis or evaluation of a text should

demonstrate not only a solid understanding of what the text is saying but of how the ideas in a text are presented and how others might respond to that text.

If you're reading sources for research, you might skim a lot of the texts to determine which ones will help you with your research; then, you'll read those texts carefully, and you'll take notes. Gone are the days when you can skim a text, throw some quotes into your essay, cite them, and earn an A on the essay. Good research requires good reading.

## What is Critical Reading?

Good reading is critical reading—active engagement and interaction with texts—and it is essential to your academic success and intellectual growth. Research has shown that students who actively engage with texts retain more information and retain it longer. Your college reading assignments will probably be more substantial and more sophisticated than those you are used to, and the amount of reading will almost certainly be greater than what most students are accustomed to. Moreover, your college professors expect you to understand and be able to explain what you read, even if they don't discuss the assigned readings in class. Finding time to read critically, therefore, is crucial to succeeding in college.

While the strategies described below are (for the sake of clarity) listed sequentially, you typically do most of them simultaneously. They may feel awkward at first, and you may have to deploy them very consciously the first few times, especially if you are not used to this kind of reading. But the strategies will quickly become habits, and you will notice the differences—in what you “see” in a reading, and in the confidence with which you approach your texts.

## Critical Reading Strategies

### 1. Preview & Skim

Look “around” the text before you start reading. Consider what kind of text you're getting ready to read. Is it a chapter from a textbook? An article? A play? A case study? This may seem obvious, but different texts require different approaches.

Next, skim the text. You've probably engaged in skimming in the past, when you've tried to determine how long an assigned reading is (and how much time and energy, as a result, it will demand from you). But you can learn a great deal more about the organization and purpose of a text by taking note of features other than its length. **Previewing and skimming** can help you 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. To preview, you skim the text and consider questions such as

- What does **the title** suggest about what you're going to read? A good title is like a movie preview: it gives you a glimpse of what the author is going to say in the text. Sometimes, a title is straight forward: it conveys the author's topic and thesis. Other times, the title is indirect or suggestive; it may make you wonder what the essay is going to be about. The title may also be a question, which means the author's thesis statement is most likely an answer to the question. Paying attention to the title is important to understanding the main point of the text. In addition, note the presence of **headnotes**, an **abstract**, or other **prefatory material**. What can you predict from these features?
- Where has this text been **published**? Where something has been published can tell you a lot about the audience, and knowing who the intended audience is can help you predict the position the author might take as well as the format the text might follow. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, is more conservative than *The New York Times*. Knowing where the information was published can also help you if you're analyzing the argument, so pay attention to the place of publication.
- Is the author known to you already? If so, how does their **reputation or credentials** influence your perception of what you are about to read? If the author is unfamiliar or unknown, does an editor introduce them (by supplying brief biographical information, an assessment of the author's work, concerns, and importance)? If no information is provided, look the author up on the web. Knowing the author's credentials and background can help you make predictions about the text you're getting ready to read.
- 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?
- Skim the text by reading the first sentence of some of the paragraphs. Are certain words or phrases highlighted or repeated? Do illustrations or photographs accompany the words?
- Read the **final paragraphs** of the text. In an article or essay, the final paragraph(s) will often (but not always!) convey the author's main point and sometimes a summary of key points the author has made. In a textbook, chapters may conclude with summaries or (like this textbook) with “key take-aways.” You'll read the final paragraphs more carefully when you actually read the text, but paying attention to them before you read can help you understand what you're reading.

After previewing the text, you should be able to make some predictions about what you're going to read. Those predictions can strengthen your reading comprehension.

## 2. Annotate

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 to make your reading thinking-intensive from start to finish:

- **Throw away your highlighter:** Highlighting can seem like an active reading strategy, but research shows that it can actually distract from the business of learning and can dilute rather than improve your comprehension. Those bright yellow lines you put on a printed page one day can seem strangely cryptic the next, unless you have a method for remembering why they were important to you at another moment in time. Pen or pencil will allow you to do more to a text you have to wrestle with.
- **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 purposes 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. See also the explanation for how to create a paragraph-by-paragraph summary.
- **Develop your own symbol system:** asterisk (\*) a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point (!) for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. Your personalized set of hieroglyphs allows you to capture the important — and often fleeting — insights that occur to you as you're reading. Like notes in your margins, they'll 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?” 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've had a chance to digest the material further or have done other course reading.
- **Look up words or allusions you don't know.** You're very likely to encounter words you don't know or references (allusions) to concepts, events, people, or places you're not familiar with. You aren't likely to understand what you've read if you don't understand certain words or allusions, so write the definition or explanation in the margins so that you will remember these words and allusions. Pay attention to how a word is used in context so that you look up the correct definition. Looking up vocabulary in a reading can make a huge difference in your ability to understand the author's main points. Furthermore, reading is one of the best ways to build your own vocabulary so that your own writing conveys ideas precisely.

### 3. Look for repetition

The way language is chosen, used, and positioned in a text can be an important indication of what an author

considers crucial and what they expect you to glean from their argument. It can also alert you to ideological positions, hidden agendas or biases. Be watching for

- **Recurring** images
- **Repeated** words, phrases, types of examples, or illustrations
- **Consistent** ways of characterizing people, events, or issue.

## 4. Write a Paragraph-by-Paragraph Summary

Sometimes called a section-by-section summary or “chunking,” a paragraph-by-paragraph summary is a very informal summary of each paragraph or couple of paragraphs of a text. You can summarize each paragraph or group of paragraphs on a separate sheet of paper or in the margins of the text you’re reading, as you annotate. Your summaries of each paragraph or group of paragraphs should be a sentence or two in your own words, but you can quote some phrases as well. You don’t worry about grammar when writing a paragraph-by-paragraph summary. The goal is to get the main points of the text on the page, in your own words, so that you know for sure you’re understanding what the text is saying.

This step takes a while, but it will help you understand the author’s main points, so if you’ve been asked to summarize or analyze a text, or if you’re supposed to learn specific concepts presented in the text, you should spend time creating an informal summary of the main points.

## To Read In Print or Online?

Many of the texts you read in your college classes, such as this textbook, are online. Professors want to save students money, so they select inexpensive or free digital texts. Most students appreciate not having to lug around heavy, expensive textbooks. Many studies show, though, that if the goal is to learn by reading, reading online is less effective than reading something in print. Sometimes, therefore, you should print an assigned text. Your college probably has a limit to how much you can print for free, and you’ll rarely need to print an entire book, so be judicious when determining what you should print.

If you do need to read something online, the following tips can help:

### Eliminate distractions

Turn off notifications. Close the windows you have open in your browser. If you can download a pdf and read that on screen, do that so that you won’t be distracted by pop-ups.

## Ignore hyperlinks

Many online readings cite their sources by creating hyperlinks. For example, an online article in *The Atlantic* may mention a study and include a link to the study. Always read a text the first time without clicking on links. You can go back and decide whether you want or need to click on the links.

## If possible, don't read on your phone

We read on our phones all of the time, but because college-level reading requires a different approach, it's best to choose a different screen to read on when reading college assignments.

## Take notes as you read

The paragraph-by-paragraph summary explained above is even more important when you're reading online.

## Use an online annotation tool

Many programs exist to help students read online. Library databases, for example, usually provide an annotation tool you can use when reading articles online.

### Key Takeaways

- College reading requires a different set of skills than the reading people typically engage in outside of college
- To read critically, you need to spend time engaging in specific strategies
- When reading to learn, print texts are usually better than online texts
- If you have to read online, use specific strategies to ensure you learn