

Close Engaged Reading

Welcome to this handout on this double-whammy, Super Skill! Reading closely and engagedly is a helpful strategy to improve both your reading comprehension skills AND your essay writing. This handout will be especially helpful to those of you who have uttered unashamedly to your friends: “Of course I read it! But I might not have understood it...” or “I read over this page ten times and it’s still not getting through!” or “My eyes are glazing over...” Let’s talk strategies!

Use this list of tips and exercises for your next reading assignment.

- 1. If you don’t do this already, start annotating!** Annotating refers to the practice of underlining, circling, highlighting, and taking notes while reading. This is the obvious first step if you’re interested in improving your reading comprehension.
 - a. Create a code.** Maybe underlining, for you, could refer to quotes you’d like to cite in a paper. Maybe circling, for you, is a symbol for a confusing sentence you need to return to.
 - b. Make sure your copy of the text isn’t a rental or a library book!**
Annotating in either of these will result in fines. If you are unable to get your own personal copy of the text, use a digital document or notebook to track your annotations. Instead of writing down whole quotes, you can easily type/write “page 35, paragraph 2 – heavy use of hyperbole,” for example. Again, use language or a code that you will easily understand when you refer back to your notes.
- 2. Keep track of confusing things as well as interesting or clear points.** The confusing pieces of a text may very well be the ideal opportunities to learn from the text (or they may be frustratingly impenetrable). If you hit an obstacle during your reading, like a confusing section, it may be time to move on to the next section. But, before doing that, make a note to yourself that this section requires further reading.
- 3. That being said, you *don’t need to understand everything in the text.*** It’s okay to move on from difficult sections of text if you feel you’re getting nowhere with it. It’s equally okay if there are other sections that interest you much more! As a time saver (a really helpful college-survival skill), ignore those confusing sections and focus in on those that are clearer to you. The clearer sections may be ripe for completing an essay assignment or for bringing up points in class.
 - a. Bring up the confusing section in class, if you’re really interested to make something of it.** There will almost definitely be other students who

had trouble with it, and they will benefit from you taking the initiative to bring it up in class. Professors also *love* when students ask questions about texts, so go for it!

4. **The Reverse-Outline.** This technique is also useful for revising your own written work, but it's equally useful for trying to make sense of a difficult reading assignment. The Reverse-Outline is all about going paragraph by paragraph, asking questions like "What is the point of this paragraph? What is the main idea? What do I think will come next?" This technique allows you to go deeper into what you're reading, almost from the perspective of the writer themselves. The reverse-outline takes you *inside* of what you are reading as a way of making sense of *how the text works*. Understanding the structure of the text is a great foundation for understanding the content.

5. **Paradoxically, allow yourself to get distracted by the material.** Sometimes the easiest way to focus in on a given topic is to explore it freely. This is the kind of stuff that L&T (Bard's Learning and Thinking program) teaches you when you get here! **Set a timer and freewrite** about what you've read so far. What stuck out to you? Why? Alternatively, you can **apply the text to another text** or something in the real world. How does this text relate to a current event that interests you or makes you feel something? **While reading, you might be reminded of something. Take that moment of recollection and chase it.** Identify what you were reminded of and put the text in concert with it. Write about this on a digital document or piece of paper. This might be the seed for a future paper!

6. **Make sure you understand the text by writing or talking about it.** Reading assignments are not just about getting through the pages, but about really understanding what the author was going on about. After reading it, try summarizing the text in a digital document, on a piece of paper, or by talking to someone. Make a note of points of confusion or gaps in your understanding. Go back into the text and find answers to any of your questions.
 - a. Now that you have a better understanding of the text, class time will likely be dedicated to *applying* the text to other theories or the real world or *challenging* the text. **Ensure that you have a grasp of the text's main arguments so that you are prepared to use it in class discussions.** Refer back to your annotations during class.