

Notes on How to Read Articles, Books and Chapters

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During your studies, you are asked to read and provide responses to your reading in various genres, at multiple points. I hope through this session to have a conversation with you about how we may go about this, to enhance your training, and to enhance your and my ability to train others in the scholarly crafts.

Reading is a huge part of our education and life as scholars. Doing it well can make all the difference. If you do it well, everything you read builds on everything else, and cumulatively becomes part of your education in the first instance, and intellectual formation in the second. The whole is much greater than the sum of the parts. If you read poorly, research and study is more stressful, and less enjoyable, and you sort of 'read to forget', which doesn't seem that useful.

What follows are some thoughts and techniques I have gathered from reading, experience, supervision, and teaching, to help in a very practical sense. Much is absorbed from the advice and guidance of others.¹ Thinking about how we do things in practical terms can help us to sneak up on our more lofty ambitions about the purpose of what we do. I would be interested to hear your own strategies and reflections on reading too, and how it relates to what kind of scholars and colleagues we want to be.

I. Where to start

Think about why you are trying to read a particular text, and what might be the most appropriate way to read it that fits that goal. (Desire, enjoyment, understanding, information, to be uplifted, to be guided or inspired, looking for proof, looking for counterfactuals, etc)

Reflection Q: What are the different purposes for which we read in our PhD studies and longer research lives? Examples might be to discover, understand, remember, and fit things together into a picture of traditions of thought.... What different purposes and aims of reading can you think of and articulate?

There is a lot of reading, so here are my suggestions for the steps we can take:

II. Intentional Skim and Surface Reading

We are sometimes taught that skim reading is not a useful way to understand a text. But that's not always true. Using what I would call an 'intentional skim reading' technique effectively can help you to understand a text. Intentional skim reading allows us to look at

¹ See for example, Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book* (1940, 1972). There are a few web searches at the back of this too.

the author's plan or map, get an overall sense of the text, and decide what kind of reading we need to do.

There are parts to an intentional-skim reading:

(a) Systematic Skim

The first part need not take very long.

The idea here is to undertake a quick check of the article/ book by (1) reading the abstract and preface; (2) looking at the table of contents; (3) looking at the bibliography; (4) reading the back cover. The idea is to get enough information to understand the sections/chapters in the book, and to see what the author considers central to their argument. Jump into the text a little bit here and there, but only with a paragraph or two, just for some tasters. If we are not talking about readings prescribed for a course but reading for research essays and your thesis for instance, intentional skim reading can help you to decide whether or not the book needs more of your time and attention, now or later. If not, put it down.

(b) Surface Read — this is the second part to the intentional skim if you are dealing with a prescribed text, or if you have decided you want to read the article or book

This is when you just read. I would usually start here by reading the introduction and conclusion, but quickly. Don't critique or worry about the argument, don't look things up, don't write in the margins or take notes. If you don't understand something, don't worry and keep reading. What you gain from this quick, surface read will help you later when you go back and put more work into the reading. After the surface read, you have to make another decision. now that you have a better understanding of the book's contents and its structure, you need to decide whether you want or need to understand it.

Reflection Q: What are your strategies for intentional skim reading? How does that relate to your practices of note-taking and research journaling?

Intentional Skim Reading gives you the sense of things.

But remember – even skim and surface reading still need to be “active”.

Here are some questions to help you in the first instance (can be especially helpful for those outside/new to academia)

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| <p>Who is the author ?
What is their disciplinary background ?
What is the text about ?
When was it written ?
Where was it written (country/institution) ?
What are the book's arguments roughly speaking ?
What evidence does it look like the author is going to offer ?</p> |
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What are the conclusions (probably) ?

Sometimes that's all we want or need. But sometimes we want more. Sometimes we want to understand.

So - What do you do next?

Here we move to a different level/kind of reading:

III. Thorough reading - this is a more analytical style of reading

Skim reading is meant to be quick, but thorough reading will take more time. If you have a lot of reading to do, it's still not a bad idea sometimes to set a time limit, at least in the first instance. At this point in the reading, you start to think more actively still about what you are reading and dig into the text to understand what the author is saying. Now you can use margin notes. Some people style this margin notetaking in the form of a conversation with the author. This can help you to avoid being too evaluative and to engage your curiosity and analytical thinking skills. If you want to at this point, devise a system of annotations to help you later. This is especially useful if you are writing a research essay, article or PhD.

Five activities can be helpful here:

- i. Generate hypotheses constantly ('the main point of the book/article/chapter is...), and questions (how does the author know that?)
- ii. Know your author and organization, discipline, backstory (notice it all – find stuff out on why the book was written?)
- iii. Know the intellectual context – discipline, field, debates (try as best you can)
- iv. Consider the historical context in which the book was written. Who were the interlocutors of the author, for instance?
- v. Summarize briefly in your own words.

In a teaching context, classes will have helped you a lot with this, but they come after you have done the first read. It's helpful to read actively – don't rely solely on the author's structures. Move around in the text. Ask yourself what the author has done, rather than only what they intentionally did.

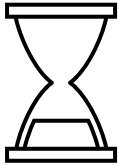
Reflection Q: What are your strategies for doing this without a teacher to guide you through a text?

As you begin – see if you can state what the whole article/book is about very briefly. Can you give a one or two sentence account? Set out its major parts in their order and relation to each other, and work out the central argument/punchline of each of these parts as you have tried to do for the whole.

Perhaps try to define the research question the author is trying to answer. Perhaps try to describe the genre in which the author is writing. You could also try to think about the affect or mood of the writing.

While those activities might sound relatively easy, they involve a lot of work. The intentional skim reading will have put you in a good position to conduct those activities.

Strategies to help you include:



When you try to explain what you have read, think about an hourglass structure. What's the general context/question/debate/tradition this reading is participating in? What's the specific argument and its significance? What's the bigger significance of the argument?

Mark up – BUT not too much. Use your unconscious mind. Use multiple modes – think about the way you learn best. I find it helpful to use a pencil and notebook instead of a screen here because it focuses the mind, removes distractions and disciplines me to be more selective about what I write down.

After a **thorough reading**, you will hopefully understand the book, and the author's own views from inside their argument and from their position. But that probably doesn't mean you'll understand the broader subject. Or that you will have enough tools to critique/engage critically with that reading.

So – what do you do next?

To get a sense of the broader subject, you need to use **comparative reading** to bring together, or synthesise, arguments, positions and perspectives from several books, either on similar subjects or cognate subjects and areas.

IV. Comparative reading

Comparative reading is the most difficult and demanding reading of all. There can be much fancier names for this too, but let's keep it simple. Comparative reading involves reading different books on the same subject and comparing and contrasting them in terms of a range of issues including vocabulary, concerns, questions, methods, approaches and assumptions. For a large research project, or to gain an understanding of a field, this will involve many texts. You can do it yourself with just one or two texts. This is a big part of what groups of readers, collectives, including reading groups and classes, do together.

When you do comparative reading, you need to identify relevant passages, translate the terminology, frame and order the questions that need answering, define the issues, and have a conversation with the responses. The goal is not to achieve an overall understanding of any *particular* book, but rather to understand the subject and develop a deep fluency. And be able to engage critically. It's hard to do well.

Your PhD should engage deeply with this style of reading.

More generally, if you can organise your thinking about what you read as you go through your degree, you can become a very good thinker. If it is a lifelong activity for you, you can become a formidable thinker, or jurist if that is what you desire.

I don't expect you to be able to master this at the beginning of a PhD. But here are some suggestions about how to begin:

- i. Organising your thinking and pay attention to *how* you are trying to organise your thinking. So, it's not just tidying up the sock drawer with Marie Kondo, it's thinking about why you would put socks, stockings and knee braces in the same drawer and why, and whether you should group things by colour, or purpose, or item of clothing etc.
- ii. Generate taxonomies, which become more virtualised as you live your life
- iii. Ask abstract questions across texts – such as, how does the author understand the problem? How does the author understand key concepts (like law, development, the state, rights, the human, justice, virtue, human rights, etc, contextualising fields and approaches, and noticing the disciplines and how disciplinary training plays out.)
- iv. Use your topics of interest (foreign investment etc) – but also parochialise your own normative assumptions by reading widely.

Reflection Q: What kind of questions are you running across your texts to help you read comparatively? Think about the register of your questions (what do I mean by this? Let's talk about it if you don't know) and what kinds of different register produce what kind of work.