



Critical Reading

Strategize: Identify your purpose and time frame, and plan accordingly. You will typically have several texts that must be read in a given time frame. The first question you ask should be: which ones are the most relevant/key? There is usually a main reading and several ancillary works; focus on the main reading first, and allocate your remaining time to the supplemental materials.

Within a text, ask yourself this key question: what do you want to be able to do with this text after you read it? Know key concepts for a test? Contribute interesting insight and questions in a class conversation? Facilitate a group discussion about the text? Employ ideas from the text in a paper of your own? Determine how much time you have to work on the text. You may not have enough time to memorize the entire book. You may get more out of a close read of the introduction and conclusion than you would out of skimming the entire book. Stay focused when you read, avoid distractions, and limit your re-reading the first time through a text. Adopt reading strategies that will best enable you to meet your goals. Ultimately, you are reading for comprehension of the major points, theoretical consideration, and methods. You are not trying to memorize the work in its entirety.

Annotate: This is the most important strategy you can use. Each reader will develop their own annotation preferences, so feel free to experiment and see what works for you. Unless the text is short and uncomplicated, almost every reader will need to annotate in order to understand what the author is saying and to remember it later. To annotate, you might:

- Write short summaries in the margins
- Write comments and questions in the margins
- Underline keywords and define them in the margins
- Bracket important sections
- Utilize the Cornell Note System
- Make mini idea maps using words and arrows or other symbols
- Number related points

We also recommend that you add annotations to your notes as you review.

Preview: Get a sense of what the text is about and how it is organized before you read it closely. You may get more out of your reading and find it easier if you use the Internet to find background information about the author, the text, or keywords in the book title or chapter titles. A review of the text will summarize a complicated argument in simpler terms. An effective way to preview text is to ask yourself what you think you will learn from a text, what evidence it seems to use, and what methods it might employ. Even if you are just making educated guesses, this process will help you remember the actual content of the text because you are engaging with it.

Contextualize: Place a text in its historical, biographical, cultural, and/or intellectual context. Especially for a historical or literary text, cultivate an awareness of the ways that your contemporary knowledge base and values may inform your reading of the text. For academic texts, having a sense of the larger conversation surrounding the text will help you perceive the significance of the text's argument.



Question: Write a question in the margin when you do not understand what an author is trying to say, or when you are not fully convinced by their argument. Writing questions will help you to know what you do and do not understand and to get your confusion cleared up. Also, these questions will help you participate usefully in class discussions. Avoid looking up questions or issues while reading; save that process for part of your review.

Reflect: Cultivate an awareness of your own emotional responses to texts. Notice when you feel challenged, frustrated, or excited. Noticing your own emotional reactions to a text will help you engage with it more fully and more fairly. It is important to be able to disagree with some parts of the text, or to dislike an author's writing style, and still be able to summarize their arguments fairly. It is also important to be able to speak specifically about what annoyed you or thrilled you about a text.

Review: Good readers re-visit interesting, confusing, or crucial moments in a text. After reading the whole text and gaining a sense of what the author is doing, re-reading carefully chosen portions of the text can help you clarify and deepen your understanding of the work. Re-reading the entire thing can be effective when combined with note-taking and other strategies, but it is a very time-consuming strategy.

Summarize: Identify the main arguments and re-state them in your own words. Re-stating them is usually the most difficult, but also the most important part of summarizing. Also, you can use these paraphrases later when you write about the text in a paper of your own. You may wish to write a short summary of the main argument and a brief outline of supporting points or key concepts at the end of each chapter.

Evaluate: Did the text change the way you think or feel about its subject? What were its most interesting and useful interventions? Are there keywords that you would like to employ in your own work? Did the author accomplish what they set out to accomplish? Is the logic coherent, or are there gaps or contradictions? Please note that gaps and contradictions do not necessarily mean an argument is flawed; they may indicate a refusal to oversimplify complex material or a means of generating additional examination.

Compare: How are the arguments, methods, and prose style of this text similar to others you have read? In what ways are they innovative, or at least new to you? Comparisons are a major component of literature reviews, so this will give you practice in developing nuanced commentary on a set of works.

Store: You may find a reading that is not immediately useful in a course, but that may be useful for your comprehensive exams, a thesis or dissertation, or other work. In those instances, be sure to take down the information and store it as part of an annotated bibliography. In those circumstances, it is more useful to use underlining and highlighting as a means of locating passages you wish to cite/quote down the road. Also keep in mind that the work's own endnotes are the best resource for finding similar works.