

STRATEGIES FOR READING ACTIVELY

KEEP A READING LOG

One overarching strategy for becoming an active reader is to write as you go through the reading process. Many students tend to resist this advice, assuming it will simply add more time to the inordinate amount of time they already spend reading. We have already been deconstructing the mythology of how much time you are already spending on your reading assignments by questioning how much of this time is actually spent on comprehending a text. Writing as you read enables you to make the most of your reading time in two ways. If you write when your comprehension is fresh in your mind, you have an excellent written record to review for papers or for tests.

More importantly, writing as you read is the best way to assure yourself that, when you have a book or an article in front of you, you are being an active learner. Active learning means doing something; the more of your senses you involve in the process, the more active you are. If you yourself do an experiment in a lab, you are being more active than if you observe someone else doing the experiment.

Underlining or highlighting a text is an action, but a very low-level one. You are using more of your senses if you copy an author's words into your Log, repeating the words as you write them. You are being even more active if you summarize your understanding of what the author is saying in your own words. At this level you are consciously monitoring your own learning—and the various strategies suggested in this handout have this as the major goal. As we have already suggested, if your mind is actively engaged in reconstructing the author's thinking, if you are carrying on a conversation with the author about what makes sense to you and what is less clear, if you are considering those points on which you agree with the author and those that you are more doubtful about—if, in short, your mind is actively engaged in these tasks, your attention and concentration is exactly where it should be. Far from increasing the time you spend in reading, writing is your best strategy for focusing your concentration on understanding a text, and keeping it there. Writing is your best strategy for making sure that what you read is fully and firmly lodged in your long-term memory.

SO—plan to keep a Reading Log for every course you take in which reading is assigned, and use your log whenever you do reading assignments. We have suggestions about what you could/should write in your log, but plan to work out systems and uses that work best for you.

ORIENT YOURSELF TO THE TEXT

This step is probably the most important step you could take to increase your comprehension and your speed. It serves two central functions. One is to open up those areas of your knowledge banks that you will need to make sense of the text. The other is to point you toward the superstructure of the text and the author's ideas.

CAUTIONS:

- **DON'T BE PUT OFF BY THE LENGTH OF THE GUIDELINES THAT FOLLOW.** These details are necessary to give you a clear sense of what orientation means. For most texts you are reading, completing this stage of the process should take no more than 20 minutes, and you can probably finish in less.
- **DON'T** treat these questions as if this were a **QUIZ**. You are **SKIMMING** and **SCANNING** the text for **CUES** and **CLUES** about what the author is doing. It doesn't matter if your answers are right or wrong. It is important for you to **GUESS**. It is the very **ACT** of looking for this information that is important because you are waking up those parts of your knowledge banks that you'll need to use when you start reading for comprehension.
- The only writing you **MUST** do are the three questions at the end. However, if writing down your answers to the preliminary questions helps you focus on this task and complete this stage, then it makes sense to write.

Where to Look for the Information You Need

- the title of the book, chapter or article (also check other relevant titles, such as the title of the book or scholarly journal in which an article was printed).
- any blurbs written about a book on the dust jacket or the back cover
- the preface or foreword of books; if an article has one, the abstract
- introductions (in books, the introductory chapter; otherwise, the opening paragraphs of an article, chapter, etc.)
- conclusions and/or summaries (final chapters, or the last sections of a chapter or article)
- in books, the table of contents; in chapters and articles, headings and subheadings within the text

The Kinds of Information You Are Looking For

- **Subject Matter and Author's Purpose**
 - What is the general subject matter about which the author is writing? How familiar am I already with the subject? From clues/cues I get from the text, what other knowledge do I have that could help me understand this text?
 - What is the author's specific topic? What prompted the author to focus on this topic? What does the author tell us readers about his/her purpose in writing? What is he/she trying to do in this text? What concern or need or intellectual puzzle encouraged him/her to spend time thinking about this topic? Can I see a relationship between his/her purpose and the approach he/she has taken to the subject?
 - Has the author made a claim about this subject? Does he/she have a main point to make? What conclusions has he/she reached?
- **Organization of the Text, Structure, Genre**
 - What am I seeing about the way the author has organized or structured this text? Does this text fall into a conventional type of discourse (textbook, argument, report on an experiment or study, book review, ethnography, etc.)? Have I read texts that

- resemble this one? If so, what does my previous experience with this type of text tell me about what I can expect the author to be doing here?
- What connections am I seeing between the structure and the author's specific focus? Between the structure and the author's purpose in writing? Between the structure and the points the author wants to make about the subject?
 - **The Context of the Text**
If it seems relevant, consider the context in which the author wrote this text. Who is the author? Would knowing more about the author help me understand this text better? When was this text written? Where? What do I know—or might guess—about the specific audience the author is addressing in this text? Am I a member of the audience the author is addressing, or an "outsider"? If I am an outsider, could I imagine myself a member of the author's audience? How? (do I share the audience's interests, concerns, desire to solve an intellectual puzzle?)

Questions to Answer about This Text

Based on the information you have gathered by looking for answers to the questions above, write out the answers to the following three questions in your Reading Log. Since you are writing for yourself, your prose may be as informal as you like. Keep in mind, however, that the substance of what you write has everything to do with preparing yourself to read this text:

- Connect this text to the course for which you are reading it. Draw as many connections as you can between this reading and the substance of other assigned reading, class discussions and lectures. Put yourself in the place of your professor and answer these two questions: Why have you asked students to read this text? What do you expect students to learn from it?
- Determine YOUR purpose and goal for reading this text. What do YOU expect to or want to learn from this text? What are you going to focus on? How are you going to go about reading the text?
- Considering your purpose and goal, how much time will you have to devote to reading this text?

You are now very well prepared to actually read this text, and the work you have already done is going to make comprehending this text much easier. However, here is some more advice about strategies you can use to remain active as you read.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR REMAINING ACTIVE AS YOU READ

Interact with the Author as You Read

Think of the author as speaking to you, and take every opportunity to talk back to him or her. Record responses you have to certain points in the margins, or, if they won't fit, turn to your Reading Log. Ask questions of the author about points that are not fully clear to you. Agree with what the author has said; think of all the things you could say to support the author's

ideas or points. Argue with the writer. Take a different point of view on the subject; point out holes in the author's thinking; point out facts or evidence the author has neglected to account for. Don't be surprised if you find yourself making reference to other reading you've done!

Freewrite or Summarize Frequently

To monitor your comprehension and to keep engaged with the text, you should stop periodically to record, in your own words, the meaning you are making of the text. Put the text aside in doing these exercises; these strategies will work best for you if you write from what you remember—and they can point you to sections of the text you may want to review. One good strategy is to freewrite after you've read a particular "chunk" of text, simply recording what you are thinking. These freewrites can include both what you hear the author saying and your own responses or reactions. Write quickly; you don't need to be organized; just jot things down. If you have more of this text to read, what do you predict, or guess, the author is going to be writing about? What do you predict or guess he/she is going to say?

When you come to a natural stopping point (at the end of a section, or when the author is pulling points together—certainly after you have finished the text), you should write a more organized summary, in your own words, of the "building" you have constructed of the author's thinking. What is the main point the author has tried to make? What does the superstructure of the author's thinking look like? Don't worry about details if you don't remember them; go for major ideas.

Record Connections You See

Whenever you find yourself consciously making connections, make a written record of them. These may be connections you are seeing between points the author is making, connections you are making between things the author is saying and knowledge you have from other sources, or connections you are making with things that are going on in class. Connections with class material are particularly relevant, and you want to be sure you play them out.

See If You Can Figure out Where the Author Is Coming From

What is the author's general attitude toward the subject? What assumptions about the subject does the author make? What premises about the subject does the author consider true or "given"? Can you see ways in which the author's premises have influenced what s/he says about this subject?

Continually Monitor Your Comprehension and Act When Your Concentration Flags

Don't allow yourself to get bogged down in a particular portion of the text. When you find yourself reading and re-reading a sentence or a paragraph, get out your Reading Log. Write to yourself about the nature of the problem you are experiencing. It is important for you to

distinguish between those problems that are coming from your inability to grasp what the author is saying, and problems related to your attention and concentration.

If you are having problems grasping what the author is saying, write, as concretely and specifically as you can, about what is confusing or perplexing you. You can put these issues in the form of questions you would direct to the author. GUESS what answers the author would give to your questions.

THEN, KEEP READING. The odds are very high that the paragraphs and pages that follow will give you answers to the questions you've asked. By and large, you'll be a much more effective and efficient reader if you keep your eye on the big picture, if you read the entire text quickly several times rather than insisting on making sense of every little part before you proceed.

If you find that your attention is wandering or your concentration is flagging, get out your Reading Log and write about what is causing the problem. Talk to yourself—in concrete terms—about what you need to do, or could do, to re-engage your mind with the text. You'll have to be honest with yourself. In some cases you'll discover that you are simply too distracted by other things, or you are too tired, to continue reading this text. In these cases, you should turn your attention to some other task or activity. If you try to continue to read without positive, concrete techniques for doing so, you'll accomplish little more than increasing your level of anxiety, which will simply make the matter worse.

STRATEGIES FOR SPECIFIC TYPES OF TEXTS AND ISSUES

How to Cope with Demanding Texts

You should develop special strategies for reading texts that you know are going to be difficult for you, either because you are not familiar with the subject matter or because they are "over your head" or because they contain a lot of detailed information that you know you need to master. Here are some suggestions. Based on what you have discovered about your own learning style, use these suggestions, modify them, develop your own.

- As counterintuitive as it may seem, the more demanding the text, the more important it is for you to get as clear a sense of the "big picture," the superstructure of the text, as you are able. Try to figure out what the author is doing here; what is the problem he/she is addressing? Generally speaking, how is he/she approaching this problem?
- If the text is demanding because of your lack of knowledge of the subject matter, a very good strategy would be to first read about this topic in a textbook, an encyclopedia, a specialized dictionary—a source, written for the general public, that could give you some basic information. This general strategy could also be helpful in cases where you are reading a primary text written centuries ago, or in a very different culture, or both.
- Technical vocabulary can often be a big barrier to reading. If you have a text that uses a lot of technical vocabulary that is new to you, make flashcards. On the top of a notecard

or a small slip of paper, write the word or phrase. Under it, write its definition. Keep these flashcards by you when you are reading. When you come across the term again, look at its definition on the flashcard. The text will make a lot more sense (besides, you can also use the flashcards to study for tests or quizzes).

- Talk about the material—with your instructor, with other members of your class, with your roommate. This exercise will be most helpful to you if you do the talking, telling the other person what you think the author is saying and doing. Be sure to take notes so you remember what was said!
- If a text is going to be demanding because it contains a lot of detailed information you must master:
 - make flashcards (see the strategies for technical vocabulary above)
 - set aside a section of your Reading Log, and record these details in a way that will best enable you to review and remember them. Don't forget what we've said earlier about the postal boxes and memory. Your objective will be to build a building of your own in which to store the material. For example, draw a diagram and fill in the blanks. Make a chart. Cluster related material according to some type of category and color-code the categories. Create anagrams or anagrammatic sentences. Be creative!
 - Since other students in the class are in the same boat, set up a study group in which you share strategies for remembering and in which you can quiz each other.

Keeping Track of Details

There are going to be occasions when you will know that, after you finish reading a text, you will want to be able to quickly locate certain types of information, certain sections, certain details. Start now to develop your own system for marking texts in a way that won't distract you from the business of comprehending the text. Writing key or summary words in the top margins of pages is one obvious strategy; color-coding such key words could also be useful. Color-coding with highlighters is another possibility. Post-It notes are also an excellent general device, especially useful when you are using library books. The nice thing about Post-It notes is that you can write your own notes on them, and they, too, can be used in a color-coding system. You can also use your Reading Log for this purpose, doing plot outlines or outlines of an argument. If you use your Log, DO get in the habit of writing page numbers next to each entry in such outlines (since the whole point of the exercise is to enable you quickly to locate particular information in the text itself!).

CAUTION is called for in these efforts. These strategies are not going to work for you if, again, they get you bogged down in detail and prevent you from looking for, or seeing, the overall structure of the text.