

ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES OR, READING FOR WRITING

Reading a text in preparation for an academic writing assignment is different from reading for pleasure, and not just because the content is more serious or scholarly. Writing about something forces you to think about it and understand it in a different way. The following strategies can be used individually or in combination with one another to help prepare you for writing about what you've read.

Pre-read

Before you even turn to page one of your reading assignment, consult a chapter summary, abstract, class notes, or even an online review in order to give you a basic understanding of what the text is going to cover and how. Reviews NEVER substitute for the text itself. If you use any outside sources in your writing, be sure to acknowledge them.

Mark up the text

Read with a pen or pencil in hand, and when something grabs your attention, make a note of it on the page right away. This will enable you to record your initial responses, ideas and questions about the text. Underline, circle, or bracket passages that seem important and note why in the page margins. Post-it notes may prove helpful for jotting down more extensive thoughts. Try even different colored post-its for different kinds of responses. Marking up the text in this way will help you locate important passages not only later when you are drafting your paper but also more immediately for class discussion. This recommendation is useful only if you are using a text that you own. If you are using a book from the library or other borrowed text, skip this recommendation.

Take reading notes

Some students find it helpful to take more detailed notes during the reading process, either in writing or at the computer. This process involves a greater time investment up front, but the reward is a much more detailed record of your thoughts, ideas and questions while reading.

Five-minute reflective writing

Even if you do not take detailed notes while reading, these five-minute reflective writing exercises undertaken as soon as you finish your reading can be an invaluable way of helping you summarize or synthesize what you've just read.

Free-write: write whatever comes into your mind, uninterrupted and unedited, for five minutes.

Quick questions: Think about what you found most interesting, important, confusing, unexpected, etc. and generate some questions about what you've just read. Then spend a few minutes going back through the text to help you find answers to your questions.

Summary: write a single paragraph (5-6 sentences) summarizing what you've just read.

Outline: make a rough outline of what you've just read.

Quotation bank: transcribe the passages you find most important and include page numbers for possible use in your paper.

Reread, reread, and reread again!

No academic writing assignment will succeed upon a single reading of a given text. Your understanding of a text will change and evolve with each subsequent reading, and you will notice things you did not before.

How to Do a Close Reading of Fiction

Q: What is a close reading?

A: A close reading is a systematic and attentive approach to understanding a text. Often called “unpacking” a text, a close reading helps separate the working parts of a text, explain them, and put them back together into a new understanding of the whole. When writing a critical analysis of literature, implementing this skill enables us to make more precise arguments about the things we read.

Q: What is the point of a close reading?

A: A close reading helps us to attain our own understanding and interpretation of the text, taking us beyond plot summary. In paying close attention to what we are reading, we can make an argument about how a small fragment of the text illuminates something about the whole.

Q: What should I avoid in a close reading?

A: The first mistake we often make in close reading is imposing our own presuppositions on the text. Some of these presuppositions might include the following: assuming that we know more than we actually know about the historical context of the novel (i.e., a certain text by an American author was written before 1800, therefore it is an extended metaphor for the formation of a new nation); automatically assuming that the “point” of the text is to say something about “today’s society.”

Sometimes the greatest obstacle to understanding is the assumption that our own worldview can adequately explain what we are reading. Instead, to develop your own interpretation, **first immerse yourself in the world of the text and try to follow its unique logic.**

Q: How do I begin a close reading?

A: Unpacking an entire novel would take a lot of time, probably more time than most of us have to spend on a short analytical paper. However, if we choose a few key scenes, episodes, or conversations within that novel for our close reading, we then have a more manageable portion of text at hand and can make a more sophisticated argument about it.

You might consider choosing:

- a turning point in the conflict,
- an illuminating moment of characterization,
- a subtle shift in the tone within the novel that carries implications for what comes after it,
- or interesting language or syntax.

Q: How do I proceed after I select a passage? What am I suppose to do with it?

A: Good question! It is advisable to read the passage twice, maybe even three times, to ensure you do not miss any details that could help you form an argument. While you are reading, look for interesting stylistic patterns, repetitions of themes, or references to other parts of the text. If none of those things are in play, you can still look at the language the author uses and consider how it might compare to or depart from other parts of the novel. (Hint: Check in other parts of the work).

If you are dealing with a descriptive passage of a particular setting, for example, you might think about how the physical space of the story affects the movement of the characters. Are they trapped in a small space that keeps them constantly colliding and conflicting with one another? Are they in the middle of the desert where the openness of the landscape leaves them feeling isolated and alone? Asking these kinds of questions while you read will help you to not only decipher what the text is saying but also to understand it from several different angles. Then, once you are through this stage, you might decide to incorporate some of your own outside knowledge or insights if you feel they are applicable.