

Jacob Wobbrock's True Confessions on How to Read

This course has a lot of reading. Most of it contains deep theoretical and practical points. Some of you may already be experienced and successful readers of this sort of material; others of you may be less so. Toward helping you to read this material well, here are some ideas based on my own experience for how you might approach your reading:

1. Read in a quiet place. Some of this material will require a good deal of concentration. I find it easiest to read in a quiet place where I'm not likely to be distracted or interrupted.

2. Take your time. This is not the sort of material you can rush through. Go slowly. Try to understand each idea before you move on to the next. 1-2 hours to read an article is not out of line.

3. Get the big picture before you begin reading. Before I begin to read an article, I (a) note the author's name and institution, (b) note the title of the article, (c) read the section headings, and (d) scan the list of references for names or papers that I recognize (this can be a fast and easy way to see who the author sees as the community for his or her work).

4. Tackle reasonable chunks of material. Too much in too short a period of time can be mindboggling. I can manage about 45 minutes of dense reading material before I need a break. Then I stretch, check my email, something... When I come back to the material 5 to 10 minutes later, my mind is refreshed and ready to go.

5. Take notes. Note taking done well can help to focus your attention on the key elements and to deepen your understanding of the material. When I read, I take notes that highlight key points and summarize (in my own words) the author's position. Also I note where in the text the author has made specific points. This makes it easier to go back to the text to discuss certain points when I need to. I also mark connections between the author's perspectives and those of others whom I've read.

6. Ask questions. I imagine myself in dialogue with the author. When the author makes a statement I don't understand or when I can imagine a situation that the author's perspective doesn't seem to be able to account for, I make a note of this (usually in the form of a question – e.g., “Why does the author say this?” or “How would the author be able to account for X?”). Again, I note the page numbers of the relevant discussion in the text.

7. Try to anticipate the instructor's questions. As you read, ask yourself, “If I were making a quiz on this material, what would I deem relevant? Important? Test-worthy?” You'll find you can often correctly anticipate the types of questions that might be asked about a piece.

8. Develop a reading routine. Set aside time for reading just as you would time for exercise, eating, or other routine activities. If you establish a routine, you'll find that reading the same time every day becomes an “easy habit” to maintain.