Effective reading

Reading is an active process, not a passive one. There is no *proper* reading of a text which reveals the text's *true* meaning. The meanings you get from a text **may not** be the same as those your teacher or your fellow students would get from it.

We always read within a specific context, and this affects what we notice and what seems to matter. We always have a **purpose** in reading a text, and this will shape how we approach it. Our purpose and background knowledge will also determine the strategies we use to read the text.

Texts themselves are very different (depending on the author's stance, values, emphasis, etc). Recognising this provides you with the beginnings of a critical approach to your reading.

What do we mean by purpose?

To read successfully, we need to know why we are reading a text, what we need to get from it, and to think about how we can use our knowledge of other related texts to formulate questions. As we explore ideas and think critically about issues raised, we make greater sense of a text.

Being aware of our purposes - and of the kind of text we are reading - helps us decide which texts to read, and which texts not to bother with.

Our purpose can involve looking for the following:

- factual information
- more details
- evidence
- an overview
- an interpretation

How does your purpose determine the strategies you should use?

Our purpose determines our strategies.

Think about how you read a newspaper. Do you begin with the first word on the first page and read through to the last word on the last page? Of course not! But why not?

When you pick up a novel, where do you begin reading? Why don't you normally read the chapters in an order of your choosing?

How do you approach:

- a text book
- an edited collection
- an academic article

The way you deal with a text depends upon your knowledge about such texts (that newspapers are a collection of separate news and opinion articles, and that they are usually organised into sections such as local news, international news, sports etc, so you can find very easily the information you want) and you can decide which order to read the contents in.

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Academic articles and books do not need to be read word by word, nor do we necessarily need to start at the beginning!

How does background knowledge affect your reading of a text?

We always bring to a text background knowledge of a general sort and knowledge that relates more directly to the content of the text.

A teacher brings a great deal of background knowledge to a text. He or she can consider the context, and all the issues and questions in light of many other texts. A student may be a relative 'beginner', but can still start to build up his or her own picture of what the issues and questions are. Reading generally becomes easier.

What is meant by a critical approach to reading?

A critical approach to reading means asking yourself why this particular author has written this particular text. You can ask yourself many questions about the text - the more the better. These are shaped by what you already understand about the text, and what you need to get from it.

Questions you can ask about the text:

What appears to be the author's main theme or point?
- What is the text really about?
- Which aspects does the author seem to be interested in focusing on and why? Does he/she omit any important points?
- Are there additional clues about the author's attitude or stance (e.g. from his/her position/qualifications, country of origin; the text's date of publication or publisher; the type of text)?
- What basis or criteria is the author using to make judgements?
- What explanations or supporting evidence are drawn on? Do they seem adequate, completely relevant?

Content, central topic, themes, and issues

To get an idea of the text's main theme and its development:
- examine the title, chapter, and/or section headings and sub-headings, and try to predict the kinds of issues the text might deal with
- try to think of related texts and ideas that might help you decide what ideas and themes the words in the title and headings refer to
- scan the contents pages and index to see if the issues that concern you are discussed, and if so, whether extensively or only briefly
- skim through the introduction and perhaps the conclusion looking specifically for statements about the main issues dealt with by the text
- look at graphs, diagrams, and tables
- scan summaries at the end of chapters or sections

To get a better understanding of a text:
- skim specific parts of the text
- scan to find where a particular idea is mentioned and discussed, or to find a specific bit of information
- pay close attention to the introduction and conclusion, for they will indicate fairly clearly what the text is discussing and why it is discussing it

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Predicting

As you become more familiar with the text of your specific discipline area (economics, history, engineering, etc.), you will become better at predicting the kinds of questions you might find answers to in the text. Being able to make predictions is important, even if you get it wrong. Creating certain expectations will increase your alertness to the text, and you will be better at noticing whether or not your expectations are met. The accuracy of your prediction is not usually the most important thing. What is important is recognising what the text does or does not deal with.

Skimming

Sometimes you need to get the **general idea** (or "gist") of a text. The way to do this is not by reading every word. Try reading quickly through the **table of contents**, the **preface**, and the **index**, then select from the **chapter headings**. You can then read the **first and last paragraphs**, and perhaps the **first sentence** of each of the other paragraphs.

Scanning

You skim read material to get the general picture. You scan when looking for specific information. You may need to find specific details on a topic for an assignment or a task that your lecturer has set. There is little point in skimming a whole book for this purpose. You should scan the text for words related to the topic. You can run your eyes down the page looking for these expressions - in chapter headings or sub-headings, or in the text itself.

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