

Charitable Reading Assignment - Part I: Relevance

A Three-Stage Charitable and Critical Reading Procedure

In this course, we are operating within a triple-reading framework. In an ideal world, you would read all sources fully three times (at least), according to the following procedure:

1. First reading: read for relevance
 - one initial steady read-through
 - no (or minimal) note-taking
 - read for relevance: is it worth a second reading? → **if not, REJECT**
2. Second reading: read for understanding (charitably/sympathetically)
 - read sympathetically and thoroughly (do not skim) taking detailed notes
 - take notes on every claim made by the author
 - list for each claim the warrants (reasons and evidence) given by the author
 - note for each claim whether you agree or disagree
 - note for each warrant whether you agree or disagree
 - assume disagreements are due to *your* misunderstanding by playing Devil's Advocate—determine the type of each disagreement and try to reconcile with it:
 - i. *disagreement of **assumptions** (background beliefs of the author's)*
SOLUTION: adopt the author's assumptions for the sake of the argument
 - ii. *disagreement of **values***
SOLUTION: adopt the author's values for the sake of the argument
 - iii. *disagreement over **evidence** drawn from questionable sources*
SOLUTION: take the sources at face value for the sake of the argument
 - iv. *disagreement of **logic** or reasoning*
SOLUTION: attempt to find agreement with the author at all costs:
 1. look first for and fix flaws in *your* logic
 2. look for ways to fix the author's argument without changing the main point; implement these changes
 3. if you cannot reconcile or fix the disagreement, mark it as FAILED
 - finally, decide if you feel a sympathetic reading is possible (i.e., are enough disagreements reconcilable enough to make a third critical reading worthwhile?) → **if not, REJECT**
3. Third reading: read critically
 - find fault, e.g. questionable assumptions, logical fallacies, poor evidence, and so on; this may involve "de-reconciling" reconciled disagreements from (2) above
 - temper your criticism with the sympathetic reading you have already done
 - take detailed notes accordingly
 - re-evaluate for relevance: is it still worth citing? → **if not, REJECT**

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In the real world, you may be pressed for time and unable to perform three independent readings. However, once you master this method, you may be able to combine the three stages without doing three completely separate read-throughs. For example, for the first reading, you might skim or read only the abstract (or perhaps just the introduction and conclusion). For the third reading, you might do a completely fresh reading only for certain key sections, and just skim and review the rest.

However, when just starting out with this method, I strongly recommend doing separate, full, independent second and third readings. In the second reading, you are playing *advocatus diabolic* (devil's advocate) or defence attorney. In the third reading, you are (possibly) playing the prosecutor. In the real world, it is vital for a fair trial that the defence and prosecuting roles be kept separate. You should, likewise, keep your defence and prosecution phases separated, at least until you have sufficiently learned the method.