

How to Read in Graduate School

Whether it is for assigned class work, qualifying exams study, or dissertation research, reading in graduate school can often feel like an overwhelming process. Many students are surprised to learn that completing the entire assigned reading is actually less important than analytically reading small portions of the text for elements like argument and context. Learning how to read effectively and efficiently will not only mitigate the rigors of your grad school coursework, but will also ultimately lead to greater understanding of and engagement with your material.

What to Read For

- *Argument* – What is the author’s thesis? What are they trying to prove? What do you think is intended to be the main takeaway from the book/article?
- *Context* – Pay attention to the literature review: what is the larger scholarly conversation the author is working within? Are they refuting, responding to, or adding to existing scholarship? Are they building on existing approaches or introducing something new?
- *Purpose* – Think about why this reading is relevant / significant for the larger conversation around this topic. You might also think about this as the “So-What?” question – basically, why do you need to read this text? How does this reading fit together with your other assigned class readings? What larger picture do they illustrate? What does this reading contribute to the larger field of study?

What NOT to Read For

- *Detail* - Don’t try to read every word of the text. The specific detail is usually much less important than the overall argument and significance of the work.
- *Memorization* – Don’t try to remember everything you read. Make notes on the key issues and try to absorb a general sense of the rest.
- *To Finish a Task* – Don’t read every assigned page just for the sake of finishing the reading assignment. It’s better to read only the introduction and conclusion in-depth than to skim the entire article/chapter with limited absorption or understanding

Steps to Reading Effectively

- 1) For your first engagement with the text, read ONLY the introduction, which will almost always contain the most relevant parts of the author’s argument.
- 2) Identify the thesis (main argument) and any important sub-arguments, also keeping an eye to framing devices for both key themes and structure.
- 3) Make notes in your own words. You want to make sure you understand, analyze, and synthesize the information, rather than just memorizing a few phrases.
- 4) Identify any references to literature review or larger scholarly context.
- 5) Identify the key types of evidence the author uses to make their argument.

- 6) Once you have analyzed the introduction, read ONLY the conclusion, paying special attention to any arguments or themes that have been expanded or restated since the introduction.
- 7) Quickly repeat steps 2-4, looking for any elaboration that expands on your knowledge from the introduction.
- 8) Identify any questions or points of confusion about what you have read. Are there parts of the author's argument you still don't understand? Do you have questions about their approach or methods? Make notes so you know what to keep looking for in the text, or to bring to your next class session for discussion.
- 9) Skim body chapters (if assigned a full book) or the body of the article with an eye to argument, evidence, and significance. Also pay attention to how the author's use of evidence either supports or complicates their main thesis. Do this relatively quickly, looking for major themes and connections rather than reading for detail.
- 10) Update your notes with an eye toward feeling comfortable with the thesis, context, and use of evidence employed by the author throughout the text.

Reading Tips

✓ Set a timer

Set relatively short reading blocks for each of the steps outlined above. For example, you might spend 20 minutes reading the introduction, 10 minutes taking notes and identifying any gaps in your understanding, 15 minutes reading the conclusion and updating your notes, etc.

✓ Highlight using AXES

Consider using the AXES method of paragraph development to help you identify key elements in your reading. This approach specifically targets the author's Assertion (argument/thesis), eXamples (use of evidence), Explanation (how the evidence supports the Assertion), and Significance (the "So What?" question). More about this technique may be found in the CWR's AXES Handout and in the Cohesion & Coherence module on the CWR Canvas site.

✓ Utilize book reviews

If you feel like you are struggling to grasp the thesis or context of a scholarly work, or just want to check whether you've highlighted all the main points, considering using book reviews. It is usually best to use book reviews *after* you have read the work yourself, so your original impressions and analysis are not influenced by an outside source. Book reviews also often include literature review context, which can be especially helpful if you are reading in a field that is new to you. Make sure to only use reviews from peer-reviewed journals or other scholarly sources in your field.