The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Engaging with Academic Texts

Learning to read with speed and efficiency is integral to success in both college and professional life. Reading should never be a passive act in which the information is received but not processed. Rather, reading should be an active process utilizing a number of techniques in order to increase both comprehension and retention of information:

- Understanding Organization (productive skimming)
- Active Reading
- Organizing Notes for Comprehension

Understanding Organization: Productive Skimming
Before even reading the text, it is important to understand how the text is laid out in order to understand what to expect in the reading, how much you will have to read, and what information is coming.

In order to productively skim, consider utilizing the following process:

- Review publication information to determine credibility and possible biases.
- Read the table of contents to determine overall organization and location of relevant information.
- Evaluate charts, diagrams, & infographics to decipher visual representations of information to come.
- Skim chapter or section headings to determine hierarchy of information, content, and relevant sections.
- Pre-read discussion or conclusion sections to determine results and major points.

After skimming the text, take time to determine how this information fits in with what you have previously read, heard in lectures, or learned outside of class. This will enable you to contextualize the knowledge you will read with what you already know.

Active Reading
Active and critical reading begins with a purpose. For instance, are you reading to write a paper? To study for an exam? To gain a better understanding of topics? Having a clear purpose in mind allows you to focus your reading on specific section, ideas, and content. For instance, if you are reading to write a paper, you need to keep in mind what information you will need in order to incorporate research. Alternatively, if you are studying for an exam you will need to look for main ideas to create effective notes.

The best active and critical reading involves interacting with the text. To do this, you will need to develop a standardized system for annotating the text. This system should be in addition to any outside or marginal notes you may take. If you do not have your own system, consider beginning with or building on the annotations in the following chart:

Symbol	Meaning
✓	Mark points/concepts you want to talk about in class discussion
✓✓	Mark points/concepts you want to include in your project
box + Underline	Draw a box around key terms and then underline the definition. For example: Reader response theory _is a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader and his/her experience reading a literary work."_
circle	Circle rhetorical signposts (clues the author gives the reader about where the text is heading). For example: _This theory is composed of three parts_: first second third
?	Use this to mark information you have a question about or don't understand
[brackets]	Use these to labels the author's thesis statement or position
*	Use this to indicate a passage that helps you better understand the author's argument
!	Use this to denote passages that surprised you or seemed strange

Organizing Notes for Comprehension
After skimming, reading, and annotating the text, it is important to take time to review what was read in order to retain information. Organizing notes after readings enables you to retain ideas and draw associations to other course materials:
- Take a break between your reading and annotating and taking notes. This will allow you to discern important information more readily as you will be seeing the ideas for the second time.
- Note the author and page number of information in order to make references and citations easier.
- If studying for an exam, take time to review the notes to ensure they are complete and focused on the content of the exam.
- If reading and researching for a paper, go through and work on summarizing, paraphrasing, or determining the use of evidence and information. Then determine how the information will fit into your essay.

> For further information on related concepts, please see the following handouts:
> - Critical Reading & Critical Thinking