

## Handout: Reading Critically and Actively

### Pre-reading

- Consider the organization of the material you are reading.
  - Read and consider the meaning of the title and of the titles of chapters or headings.
  - If possible, attempt to determine the thesis (main point) of the work by skimming the introduction or introductory paragraphs. You may change your mind later about what the thesis is and where in the work it is located, but continually reading with the thesis in mind will help you to better understand the sub-topics (or sub-claims) and supporting material. Often you may find that the complete thesis is not stated until near the end of a work.
  - If you are previewing a book, read or skim any introduction, forward, or afterward; skim the first and last paragraph(s) of each chapter. If you are reading a large article or essay with distinct sections, do the same.
- Consider the author and style
  - Is any information offered about the author that might provide some clues about his or her purpose in writing the piece and about his or her perspective on the topic or issues involved?
  - Also, pay attention to the type of language used. Is it highly technical or academic? Who is the intended audience? Considering whom the author is addressing can also supply you with added insight into his or her purpose. In addition, considering language, style, and audience can help you get into the right frame of mind for the type of text that you are about to read.
- Read any abstracts, outlines, or summaries that accompany the work.
- Take time to examine pictures, graphs, charts, or other graphic images and consider their purpose in light of what you already know about the text.

### Thinking about What You Read

- Types of meaning: (Quick Access Reference Guide for Writers by Troyka and Hesse discusses the value of considering literal and inferred meanings on pp. 7-10)
  - Literal: As you read, initially you will simply want to make sure that you understand the material at the most basic (or literal) level, that you comprehend what the author is trying to say. (i.e. What happened? What's the issue/topic? What's being proposed? Who is involved? What evidence or reasons does the author offer in support of his or her thesis?)
    - Although literal meaning is the most basic level of meaning, it can sometimes be difficult to comprehend an author's literal meaning when language is technical or vocabulary is complex. Read with a dictionary near by and look up words that you don't understand (especially if you sense that they are key to the overall meaning and the passage is important to your purpose for reading).
    - If you don't understand a particularly difficult passage of a work, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's time to give up on the entire text altogether. Try passing that section and seeing if you can still glean the meaning of the whole in spite of your difficulty with some of the parts. You may even find that, after reading the majority of a text the first time, upon reviewing, parts that initially did not make much sense become clearer.
  - Implied: What messages come across through your reading of the text that were not explicitly stated?
    - Does the author make assumptions?
    - What can you learn from the author's position or beliefs by sorting out the facts presented in the text from the opinions expressed?
    - Does the author seem biased in any way about his or her topic?
    - What does the tone of the work say about the author's perspective? (e.g. Is the language light and humorous or is it composed and weighty?)
- Making connections and judgments
  - Applying what you read
    - Think about "if/then" statements: "If the author is stating *X*, then what is he or she suggesting, implying, or requesting?" (Barnet and Bedau 33)
    - What does the author want me to do once I have read and understood his or her argument?
    - How might I make use of this information in other situations? How can I apply it to my current body of knowledge and life-experience?
  - Comparing or contrasting what you read

- How do the ideas or arguments in this work relate to the ideas or arguments in other works that I have read? How are they similar? How are they different? What new thoughts and ideas arise for you when you compare and contrast these ideas or arguments?
- It is important to note that comparisons rarely yield complete similarity or complete difference. Most comparisons yield a mixture of both and the complexity of similarities that aren't completely similar or differences that aren't completely different provides fertile ground for critical and productive thought and writing.
- Evaluating what you read (Troyka and Hesse 10)
  - “Does the writer provide evidence for all claims?”
  - “Is the evidence sufficient and appropriate?”
  - “Does the writer omit any viewpoints contrary to the evidence?”
  - “Does the writer make reasonable assumptions?”
  - “What biases might the reader have?”

### Marking the Text and Note-taking

- It is important to mark your text in some way (or make notes if you have a library book or are concerned about preserving the value of a text) to make note of the main ideas or most important or interesting points as you read. Pay particular attention to passages that make you stop and think or spark your imagination.
- Make sure you attempt to identify the main point (sub-topic or sub-claim) of each section by underlining, highlighting, or making notes (either marginally, in a notebook, or on a computer).
- Mark passages that confuse you or about which you have questions, that you want to come back to and consider at length once you're finished reading the text, that you want to bring up in class discussion or discuss with your peers.
- Make notes in the margins that pose questions, forge connections, add complexity of thought, or provide examples that spring to mind as you read. You might even jot a brief summary or paraphrase in the margin or define a difficult term that you had to look up in the dictionary. Some useful notes might include: “What does this mean?”, “Why did this happen?”, “I'm not sure that I agree with this statement.”, “This reminds me of . . .”, “How does the author know this? Can he prove it?”
- Sometimes it is useful to number a series of points or steps in a process.
- If you have to take notes instead of marking a text, it's helpful to make a quick note about the passage to which you're referring. (e.g. “Page 10, Paragraph 3, middle of the paragraph, sentence begins “Some years ago—never mind how long precisely . . .”) ***Always be careful to have a clear system of differentiating between your own words and those of the author whose work you are reading!***
- Don't overdo it! If you underline or highlight too much or make too many notes nothing stands out any longer and the truly important points that you noted become lost in a sea of yellow highlighting ink. If you find yourself wanting to highlight or comment on everything, read a paragraph or two at a time and then come back to highlight and make notes, asking yourself what ideas are truly the most important, always considering your purpose for reading.

### Reviewing

- Briefly go through the pre-reading process once more, only now you are *reviewing* instead of *previewing*. Reconsidering the organization and main points of the text will serve several purposes: it will help you retain what you just read; it will allow you to answer any questions that arose early on but were answered later in the text; it will allow you to ask further questions based on what you know after reading the entire text; it will allow you to make connections between the parts of the text and consider the overall reasoning behind its presentation; it will allow you to consider the text as a whole—you can reconsider the beginning and middle with the entire text in mind.
- Make sure that, as you review, you pay close attention to the passages that you have highlighted, and that you follow your notes, adding to them when necessary.

### Works Cited:

Barnet, Sylvan and Hugo Bedau. Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing: A Brief Guide to Argument. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2005.

Troyka, Lynn Quitman and Douglas Hesse. Quick Access Reference for Writers. Boston: Prentice Hall, 2007.