

SCHLOSSER'S GUIDE TO READING DIFFICULT TEXTS

PURPOSE

One of the purposes of a liberal arts education is to learn how to read. Yes, you are already literate. Yes, you have probably read Chaucer or Shakespeare and maybe even a little philosophy. But now you must learn to make sense of difficult texts on your own. Assignments in college will require you to read, understand, analyze, and evaluate written documents ranging from scientific articles to newspaper clippings to tomes of philosophy. My hope is that these simple steps will help you successfully advance from being readers to being *good* readers. Bon chance!

FOUR STEPS

1. **SLOW DOWN!** You are reading too fast! Good readers don't expect to read more than 20 (yes, 20) pages an hour of a difficult text. Don't expect that the first time you read Aristotle you'll do much better! Put down your highlighter and pick up your pencil. Reread a paragraph if you come to its end and can't summarize what you've read. If you don't understand something, write your question in the margin. Respond and question with your pencil while you read. This will slow you down, but your comprehension will soar.
2. **EMPLOY DIFFERENT STRATEGIES.** Step 1 is important, but not everything requires that kind of reading. Sometimes you will need to skim, to read only the introduction and conclusion, or to skip straight to the data section. Ask yourself the following questions: why am I reading this? What do I need to know? Focus your close reading on the most important sections.
3. **THINK STRUCTURALLY.** Organize large sections of text into smaller parts. If the text has chapters, look at these. Why is it organized as it is? What does the structure of the text (the title, subtitles, different parts, chapters, sections, or subsections) tell me about its intended meaning? Take one paragraph and ask the following: What does it say? What does it do (in relation to the rest of the text)?
4. **CONVERSE.** Whatever you read will be in conversation with other texts. You may not be familiar with these other texts, but try to imagine them. What questions is your author trying to answer? Who might be her audience? What is his tone? What is she ignoring? Second, now that you are a reader, you are also a part of this conversation. What would you ask this writer? How do these points speak to your concerns? Pick up your pencil and return to step 1 . . .

OTHER HELPFUL HINTS

There is no single way to become a good reader. Sometimes these other tricks will help: keep a dictionary with you whenever you read; use a note card as a bookmark where you write key concepts and terms; write summaries to yourself after each chapter; write a letter to your mother explaining a particularly difficult section; periodically look up from the text and try to ask yourself the question to which you've been reading the answer; draw a concept map of the ideas in the text; talk to your roommate about what you've been reading. Above all, enjoy!