Reading Actively

When you read something make it an active (rather than passive) exercise. Know why you are reading. What do you want to know? What questions do you have? What can the text teach you? What is interesting about the text? Reading with questions in mind is one way to read actively.

Read with questions in mind.

You might think of active reading as reading with a set of questions in mind. Because we often want to understand an author’s purposes, strategies and arguments, you might start with questions like—What is this person saying? Why is s/he saying it? How is this author making these points? What forms of evidence is s/he using? Is their argument persuasive? Answer these questions in your head as you do your reading.

Think about it.

Schedule time for reflection. Even if it’s only a few minutes, take time to paraphrase passages in the text. Explain to yourself the author’s argument. Review the evidence. If you are using your own text, you might write these reflections in the text’s margins. This will help you remember key points.

Examine the basic parts of your text.

In addition to understanding an author’s purposes and arguments, you want to consider how the text works—what are its basic parts, key words, images or metaphors? Here is a short list of things you should think about when reading our texts closely:

1. What is this text about? What is the author saying? What’s the argument?
2. What are key terms used here?
3. Are there unresolved tensions or ambiguities? Are there lingering questions?
4. What is the structure of the text? Where are the climactic or key moments?
5. What is the emotional tone of the text? Is something troubling this author? Did he/she write this out of anger, sadness or joy?
6. Are there recurring images or metaphors in the text? Why are they important?

Don’t be afraid to mark up your text (in pencil) with answers to these questions -- and with additional comments or questions of your own. When you’re done with this, you’ll be ready to think about generating answers to these questions in your essay drafts.

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1For information on reading actively I am indebted to two different sources: Anne Monius’s handout on reading and Helen Vendler’s Poems, Poets and Poetry (Boston: Bedford, 2002).