

Reading to Write: About Active Reading

Reading for university should not be a passive process of turning pages, marking a few lines, and hoping that the information will sink in. Planning to return and re-read the course material before an exam or the writing of a paper is an admirable goal, yet you won't always have time to do so. Thus, it's crucial to get the most out of your reading the first time through. Reading actively means that you **engage mentally with the text** and **keep some sort of physical record** of that engagement, usually in the form of notes. Active reading requires alertness and a willingness to **think as you read**. Below are some suggestions for developing a more active approach to your reading. You may find that you need to adjust these techniques to your own preferences or according to the subject matter.

- a. Always read with a pen in your hand or the computer ready for use. Develop a system of note-taking that helps you distinguish between **overarching ideas** and an author's **logical explanations** or **development** of those ideas. Keep a record of **how a concept is built up** or elaborated in a particular text. Also, your notes should distinguish between the **overarching ideas** and the **details, facts, data** and **examples** that support or illustrate those ideas. Experiment with capitalization, italics or bold type, and use symbols like arrows or bullet points.
- b. Keep a record of your own **critical responses** to the reading. How does this text connect with other texts you've read for this course? What **gaps** in your understanding of the subject does it seem to fill? What **questions** remain in your mind?
- c. Avoid worrying about whether your responses are appropriate or well expressed. Think of them as just the **first stage** in a process of critical thinking that will eventually yield the more developed ideas you will use in your essay. For example, noting that you're confused about the author's presentation of idea A vs. idea B may eventually lead to a perception that there is indeed some ambiguity in the text. This ambiguity can then be further explored and may eventually form the basis of **a thesis** for your paper.
- d. Ask the author some **questions** in your mind, or **argue** with him/her, noting down what you've "said". The more you've engaged with this material **in writing**, the easier it will be to write on these topics in class. Your essays will also be strengthened because you will already have been doing much of the **thinking** required for effective writing.