

Guide to Reading Social Science: How to work through long or difficult reading assignments^[1]

Courtesy of Professor Susan Silbey and colleagues, 2010

Faced with a long list of readings, you need to learn to read extensively as well as intensively, in as efficient a manner as possible. It is rarely practical to read everything word for word and line for line. Although close textual reading and interpretation is part of social science tradition, it is often not possible, nor advised, especially in undergraduate courses. Some social science texts that are still in use were written more than a century ago and were intended for very different readers. Instead of trying to read every line and word, consider the following suggestions for more efficient and effective course reading.

1. Begin any reading assignment by reading the abstract, preface, introductions, and conclusions. These are often the most important parts of a text because the author frequently signals his or her major themes and arguments. You should also look over the text to discover key words and obtain an idea of the kind of evidence being provided to support the major themes and arguments. Often the topic (first) sentences of paragraphs provide the links in the author's argument.

It can be helpful to formulate what you think you know about the issues being addressed. What do you consider the essential points and key explanatory factors? Or, if you feel you know nothing about the topic, devise a list of what you need the author to tell you in order to become informed.

2. Mechanics of reading and note-taking. Read the text and make marginal notes (on post-its or a separate piece of paper if the text is not a photocopy) indicating what seems like the strongest parts of the text. When you have completed a once-through—skimmed—the text, go back and take notes in outline form, by paraphrasing key sentences or paragraphs. Do not rely on underlining or highlighting. In order to “know” a text you need to move from passive to active reading, which is done by converting it into your own words and formulating your own organization of the text. The text needs to be processed several different ways in your brain.

Do not get “bogged down.” If there are words you don’t understand, names mentioned you’ve never heard of, inadequate and incomplete references to places or ideas, skip over them and keep skimming until you come to a familiar key word or phrase. All authors of the texts we’re reading assume that the reader knows things that you don’t. Clearly this course is not going to pay attention to these features of the readings, so don’t worry about them.

Analytical reading

1. Classify the essay according to kind and subject matter. Into what paradigm or research program (genre) does it fit? What is the essay about as a whole?
2. Enumerate the major parts in their order and relations and outline these.
3. Define the specific problem or problems the author has tried to solve. What question does the author claim to address? You might also want to think about how this reading fits into the course. Why is this text located at this point in the syllabus? What is the topic for this week and how does this text provide an answer or information on this topic?
4. What theoretical statements does the author make? A theoretical statement proposes a relationship. For example, structural theories of deviance suggest that deviance (what needs to be explained) is a consequence of some part of the structure (organization of the parts) of a society. “Social structure produces deviance” is the generic theoretical statement in this example.
5. What are the concepts used? Become familiar with the author by defining key words. What are the crucial details of the argument? In the example above, what is social structure? What is meant by “deviance”?

6. How does the author's argument/position compare with that of others who address the same or related question? What are the points of similarity and difference?
7. What normative statements (value judgments) does the author make? What values does the author assume readers will share? What assumptions does the author make that may be contestable?
8. What is the author's methodology? (Here you should be concerned not only with the methods used but the kinds of arguments implied or given about what methods are more or less appropriate.) What constitutes evidence in this reading? Know the author's arguments by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.
9. What problems the author presented have been solved, and which ones remain unsolved? Which of the unsolved ones does the author acknowledge? Does the evidence support the argument? If you disagree with the author, on what do you base your disagreement? Is the author uninformed, misinformed, illogical, imprecise, inconsistent (i.e., internal contradictions in the text) or sloppy (the text is incomplete)? You need to criticize fairly; no "flaming" allowed, no *ad hominem* arguments (attacking an author's personal characteristics rather than the text itself) allowed.

Abstract

Full Bibliographic citation.

Thesis: 1-2 sentences.

Details: 3-4 well constructed paragraphs.

Themes: 3-4 bullet points defining and using authors key concepts