

Seven Strategies for Reading Difficult Texts

Approaching any theoretical text for the first time can be daunting – especially in a course where you cannot rely on a professor's lecture to highlight its main arguments. What follow are seven strategies to help you to learn to read texts without the aid of an interpreter.

1. What is the main argument or plot of the book/article?

Sometimes it is not so easy to tell what the main point is that an author is trying to convey: there is not always a simple thesis statement in the text. One strategy for finding the answer is to *read introductions and conclusions with special care*. What does the author say she is arguing? How does she set up her argument?

2. Read the title and subtitle of the text, the table of contents, the dedication, and the section headings.

Like reading the introduction and the conclusion, these seemingly unimportant details can give you a great deal of information about the main argument: how is the argument structured? How is the argument broken down into chapters? Who is the intended audience? This exercise is especially important when you are reading only *selections* of a book, as will often be the case in this course, because it can help you to see how the piece you are reading fits into the overall book that you aren't reading.

*It is far better to focus on **how** the argument is structured, and to get a sense of the overall argument, than to try to read **every word of the text**.*

3. Make vocabulary flashcards to keep track of new and important terms.

Vocabulary cards are useful ways of keeping track of how a single term (such as 'multiculturalism' or 'liberalism') is used differently in different places in a single text. They are also useful ways of tracking differences *among authors* in how they deploy similar terminology with dissimilar meanings.

Vocabulary cards can also be useful ways of learning how to speak the language of the discipline that you are studying. Write down unfamiliar words, or words that are being used in strange ways. If you cannot figure out the definition of the term from the text, then ask your teacher about it. *Academese* is nobody's native tongue; there is no shame in being unfamiliar with it.

4. Read for tone, style, and method.

Pay attention to *how* an author makes her argument. The clues about *how* an argument gets made can help to make sense of *why* the argument is or is not successful, and they can give you more information about *what* the argument actually is.

What is the *tone* of the text? Is it: personal, polemical, abstract, passionate, argumentative, conciliatory? *Why* do you think the author is using that tone?

What is the *style* of the text? Is it: journalistic, academic, narrative? *Why* has the author adopted that style?

What is the *methodology* used in the text? How does the author substantiate her claims? What counts as a strong argument for her? On what grounds does she dismiss other arguments? What enables the author to see the issues from her argumentative perspective? *Why* has the author adopted that method?

5. Think about the Political Context of the Text

When was the text written? Why was the text written then? Does the author refer to any historical or contemporary events which might be relevant in interpreting her argument? Are there aspects of the author's personal biography which might help to make sense of the text?

6. Contextualize the Text

How does this text fit in with the other texts we read this week? Where does this author converge and diverge from the other authors?

How does this text fit into the course as a whole? Into the genre or discipline (i.e. political theory)?

7. Think about the Author's Grand Project

How does this text fit in with other works by the same author that we have read? Is the author consistent from one text to the next? If so, how can thinking about the other texts we have read help to illuminate this one? If not, what accounts for the inconsistencies?