

READING TIPS

No miracle formula exists for breezing effortlessly through reading material; reading (and thinking) is work, hopefully enjoyable work. At the same time, reading is a skill that can be honed and developed. To that end, here are some tips for reading:

1. Set the Atmosphere

Make a space and time free of distractions. Unplug from the frenetic world of technology. If it helps, play some music that enhances concentration.

2. Customize the Approach

Reading technique should be customized to the material and purpose. Close Reading emphasizes slowing down, analyzing every word, playing with every turn of phrase, soaking up every detail, asking questions of the text and author, finding “holes” in the text and asking how they might be filled. This kind of reading is used frequently in Biblical Studies for detailed inspection and understanding of a specific passage; it is also vital for studying poetry, legal materials, and conceptually dense prose, e.g. philosophy. Most other kinds of reading in the humanities call for an approach that maximizes speed and comprehension. This is the goal of the tips that follow.

3. Maintain a Pace

Decide how much material you need to get through in an allotted time. Give each task a specific block of time. Hold yourself to your decision. When the time is up, move on to the next task. Work on improving your pace, if only by small increments.

4. Look Before You Leap

Do a quick glance through the entire text to get a sense of its structure and to decide where to focus one’s energies. Notice the tools that the text provides, including a Table of Contents, Indices, Glossary, Bibliography, List of Authors Cited, etc., and make use of them as needed.

5. Build Speed and Comprehension

As you read, do not vocalize or sub-vocalize (sound out words in your head). Do not focus on each word. Take in groups of words together. Do not read for words so much as the flow of ideas, images or dialogue. Do not seek dry information. Rather, try to feel what you are reading; imbibe the author’s passion, curiosity, and perspective. As you read, think sympathetically first, critically second (T.S. Eliot). Train your eyes to

move quickly and smoothly across and down the page, preferably in a serpentine pattern, using your finger or a card if needed. If you feel that you have missed something, do not immediately go back. Rather, if you would like to come back to a difficult or interesting area for closer inspection, mark the page and return later.

6. Take Efficient Notes

If using your own book and you plan to keep it in your library for a long time, feel free to make notes within the text itself. If not, use 3M sticky pads to mark pages to which you can return later. Remember that xeroxing material is not a substitute for taking notes; notes are what you record, whether by writing on paper or by typing on a computer. At the same time, do not use your notes to summarize everything a book says. Rather, try to determine in advance what you need to get out of the book, and focus your note-taking efforts there. Once you finish a given portion of reading, set aside a few minutes to take notes, first recalling as much as possible by memory only, then going back as needed to check or fill in important information. During this time, do not simply regurgitate terms, concepts and arguments; engage them, question them, develop them further. The more you engage what you read, the more it becomes a lasting part of you.