

Learning How to Read

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Of course, you already know how to read. However, reading for a college course is different from the reading you did in high school or the reading you do for fun. Most of the time, you cannot simply pick up an academic text and read it like a novel. You need to be an active, rather than passive, reader of these texts. Try to make the most of your reading time by taking notes and reflecting on what you read. Not only will this help you read more deeply, you will also have better memory/recall of the information, and your notes can keep you from having to re-read the chapters later on.

Below, find information on how to actively read different kinds of sociology texts that you may encounter.

Textbook Chapters: Make an Outline

Use the textbook's headings and subheadings as your guide. The textbook is organized in a purposeful way, so pay attention! Set up a notes template based on the structure of the chapter that is already there.

EXAMPLE:

Title of Chapter

- Introductory notes – main theme in chapter
 - Heading 1 - Notes and key terms/ideas
 - Subheading 1 - Notes and key terms/ideas
 - Subheading 2 - Notes and key terms/ideas
 - Heading 2 - Notes and key terms/ideas
 - Subheading 1 - Notes and key terms/ideas
- (etc.)

Also remember to use the chapter's study questions and key terms. As soon as you are finished reading the chapter, look through those questions/terms and see if you can answer/define them.

Book Chapters, Excerpts, and Articles: Make a Recap/Reflection

After reading a book chapter, excerpt, or article, you should ask yourself questions to be sure you comprehend the material. I suggest cataloging the readings and using the same set of questions for each. By putting the readings into the same template, you can also sort them for faster recall (and as a side effect, improve your cognitive retention).

EXAMPLE:

Author:

Title:

Week Assigned:

Topic Assigned: [Look at the syllabus. What is the course addressing this week?]

Questions

What is the author's main point? What are they trying to tell me?

What evidence does the author present to prove this point?

Reading Summary

Interesting examples/ideas from this reading (that I could use in an essay)

How can this reading relate to another reading/textbook chapter in class?

Whole Books: See the Forest AND the Trees

When it comes to reading whole books, remember that the intention of a book is to pull together multiple pieces of an argument together into a single place. One way to think of a book is to picture a puzzle (a 5-10 piece puzzle is a good visual). Each of the chapters represents one piece in the puzzle, while the whole book represents the total picture of the puzzle. When writing a book, an author spends time developing each chapter because each chapter is its own unique piece. Then the author combines these chapter "pieces" with the introduction and conclusion to show the big picture.

I suggest you make a reading recap (as above) for each of the chapters in the book (the trees). Then, write a separate reading recap for the whole book (the forest).

Theoretical Texts: Go Slow and Watch the Argumentation Unfold

Remember that theorists are going about explaining a relatively broad social phenomenon. Some of the social phenomena that famous sociological theorists have explored are topics such as:

- How is the world socially constructed? (e.g. Berger and Luckman's *Social Construction of Reality*)
- How do religions form? (e.g. Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*)
- Where does capitalism come from? (e.g. Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*)
- How and why is capitalism exploitive? (e.g. Marx's *Capital* and *Manifesto of the Communist Party*)
- Why do people interact the way they do? (e.g. Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*)

Because theorists are explaining broad social phenomena, the evidence they will use will also be very broad. They will probably pull on a variety of evidentiary sources to prove their point. They will also discuss their theories through different lenses/angles to prove that the theory still works. Doing all of this takes time, which is why they are not able to quickly "get to the point" like other kinds of texts are able to do.

In addition, theorists are also in the process of building upon (or even contradicting) the work of other theorists in that field. You will often see references to other authors in their texts; those references are there because the theorist is trying to build upon or refute the work of the other author. Sometimes, building upon others' works takes the form of reviewing all the available arguments/theories that explain the social phenomenon in question, and then carefully pointing out why those available arguments/theories are flawed or incomplete. Durkheim is a notorious example of this. He will set up several "potential" explanations for the phenomenon in question, and then knock them down by showing what they do not explain or why they are inadequate. He does this over and over until, finally, he arrives at his theory, which he then goes on to prove skillfully.

Finally, remember that most theory was written a long time ago. Classical theory texts were written over 150 years ago. So the language and writing style will be different from what you're used to.

I suggest you keep all of this in mind when you read a theory text. First thing to remember is to read it slowly; my suggestion is to allot twice as much time for reading theory than however long it takes you to read other non-theory texts. You must also be aware of how the author is setting up their argument. Take note when the author builds up an argument then reviews why it doesn't work – that is all part of building up to their theory.

While you are reading: take regular stock of what you have read and the direction its going in.

- At the end of each page (or paragraph, if you are struggling), summarize what that page/paragraph was about in your own words. Be brief, try to do this in one or two sentences.

After you have finished reading: get a sense of the chapter's main argument

- Go back through the chapter and "reverse outline" it. In other words, create an outline that maps the structure of the chapter from start to finish. This should be comprehensive but also concise; you should use bullet-points and avoid long sentences/paragraphs

Finally, check your understanding and comprehension of the reading.

- Can you identify what the theorist is trying to explain, their argument for explaining it, and the evidence they use to support that argument?
- Can you identify the counter arguments the author is refuting?
- Can you summarize the theory in your own words?
- Can you connect this theorist's ideas to something else you've discussed in class?
- Can you apply this theorist's ideas to something going on in the real world today?