

Tips For Reading Social Theory

by Erica Bender, PhD Candidate, UC San Diego

First of all, recognize that your typical reading strategies won't work, or at least won't work as well.

- **Theory writing does not look like the writing you are used to reading.**
 - Older theory – different writing conventions and patterns of language
 - Theorists are prolific scholars, so they can publish work easily even if it is difficult to understand; they are the social geniuses of their/our time.
 - Theory texts often feel like a 'stream of consciousness' rather than a well-thought out and organized essay with an intro/thesis, body/evidence, and conclusion. Sometimes, the reader feels like they're being led down the 'yellow brick road', unsure of where it will lead and what they'll see along the way.
- **We all have a tendency to read passively.**
 - Does this sound familiar? You sit down to read something required for class. You see how many pages it is and dive right in. After a few pages, your mind starts to wander. You refocus and continue reading, perhaps even highlighting or underlying things as you go along. Another few pages, and you're distracted again. You check the clock and either time is moving so slowly it makes you want to cry or it's moving so quickly you immediately judge yourself for being a slow reader. Eventually you struggle through the rest of the reading and close the book/file, happy it's finally over. You remember that each individual word/sentence made sense to you, but it is a kind of mash-up of a lot of ideas; you're not really sure what you were supposed to get from that or how to use that information.
 - This is an example of reading passively. Passive reading is when you simply read a text and assume your brain will absorb the information and know what to do with it. Passive reading can work with a great novel that you read on a rainy day, because fiction writing is designed to be descriptive and absorbable. But it won't work with theory or dense academic texts.
 - 'Engaged' reading means doing MORE than moving your eyes along a page and comprehending the words that you see. It also involves thinking about the material at the same time that you read it. It means reflecting on the reading, making sure you understand the intricacies of the argument, and pondering on how you might use it.
- **So the challenge with reading theory is two-fold:**
 - **Making sense of a text** that is hard to read because it is not organized nor articulated in ways we are comfortable with
 - **Breaking out of our passive reading habits** that won't be helpful for us while we are reading this relatively convoluted piece of work

Challenge 1: Making sense of theory texts by knowing what to look for

- **The first step to making sense of theory is to recognize that there *IS* a method to the madness.**
 - Remember, theorists are trying to get their readers to draw a particular conclusion. They have an agenda – they want their reader to believe in their explanation of the world. There *IS* a point they are trying to make. So how do they do that?
- **Here are some common conventions that theorists often use in their writing:**
 - **Description:** Theorists will typically describe the world as they see it; they will describe some kind of phenomenon that is in need of explanation.
 - **Explanation:** All theorists want to explain how/why/when some phenomenon occurs and/or its consequences. There are many types of explanations, and these are pretty common:
 - A statement of explanation *early* in the text that states the theorist's explanation succinctly; from there the author goes on to prove it (this is less common in older theory texts)
 - A *concluding* explanation later in the text; after the theorist runs through all of what *COULD* explain the phenomenon but *DOESN'T*, they'll propose their own explanation.
 - Explanations interlaced *throughout* the text that are meant to be taken as a collective whole.
 - **Disproving alternative theories:** theorists will often offer alternative explanations for the social phenomenon in question and then disprove them; in other words, they'll prove why those explanations *DON'T* work for explaining that particular phenomenon. This makes their own explanation more believable.
 - **Using metaphors/imagery to make their points:** Often, the phenomena theorists are trying to explain are macro-level, meaning the phenomena are beyond our conscious awareness as individual people on the ground. Also, theorists are prolific scholars who are making relatively ground-breaking assertions. As such, they often have to make their point using knowledge that the reader already has access to. Theorists will often use metaphors, analogies, or imagery to illustrate their point so that we can understand where they are coming from. For example, Smith uses the metaphor of an 'invisible hand' to explain why capitalism appears to be a self-sustaining system.
 - **Prescription:** sometimes also called the "is/ought" distinction, this is a strategy for theorists to provide some commentary on the phenomena they explain. After describing and explaining the phenomena (and in the process also reviewing why other theorists' explanations don't work), many theorists will inject some kind of commentary or critique of the way things are.

- **So to recap, theorists will describe the world as it is, analyze it and explain why it works that way, and then usually offer some kind of prescriptive remedy for fixing/improving/changing society or propose what the future will look like.**

Challenge 2: Breaking passive reading habits

- **It's easy to read passively, but that doesn't mean it's good.** Passive reading takes less time, it's easier, and it feels like the right way to read. But it actually works against you at this level. We know that engaged reading is better, but it also seems significantly harder.
- **Here are my tips for practicing engaged reading, broken down into baby steps:**
 1. **Have some foresight:** this is key for having the motivation to practice engaged reading. When you practice engaged reading, you will actually learn the material in a more robust way and retain more of the information. That means you will, hopefully, have less confusion later and you will not have to go back to re-read the material.
 2. **Know the terrain:** Before you start reading, look at the text. How long is it? Are there sub-headings? How long are the paragraphs/sentences? Get a feel for how the author organizes their thoughts BEFORE you start reading.
 3. **Get a map:** Refer to available reading guides to know what you should be looking for as you read. The questions and/or notes in the reading guide should act as clues for what you should be able to see in the text.
 4. **Read and think:** Start reading the text, and take paragraph-based notes (on a separate paper) as you read. After you get to the end of a paragraph (or 2-3 paragraphs), write down what the author was talking about in these paragraphs. It's easy for one paragraph to simply blend into another one, so be vigilant about seeing when the author starts to move on to a different point. Take notes, paragraph by paragraph (or page by page) for the ENTIRE text. This process is tedious, but it's CRUCIAL for reading theory effectively.
 5. **Connect the dots:** After you read through the text and take notes, look back through your notes. These notes are a type of 'outline' for the author's material. Take a look and see if you can trace a pattern through the different kind of notes. What is the author trying to explain? What alternative theories to they disprove? What does their explanation look like? What kind of evidence do they use for their own explanation?
 6. **Distill it:** summarize the reading as concisely as possible – what is the main lesson the theorist is trying to teach us? Try to summarize the argument in 4-7 sentences.
 7. **Reverse-Outline:** Go back through the text and construct an outline from the paragraphs/sections. Use bullet points and short phrases, avoid using whole sentences and do not allow yourself to use any quotes. The point with this is to put the content into your own words and see how it is organized.
 8. **If necessary, go back and re-read the text:** Usually you will get a strong grasp on the reading after the 2nd or 3rd time through.