

Some Thoughts on Active Reading

JUST AS THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF TEXT, THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO READ. Often something as simple as a publication's format can provide a context that instructs a reader on the best approach. While we could read *Entertainment Weekly* in a chaotic waiting room, we would most likely prefer a quieter spot for our Biology Textbooks. We read *Entertainment Weekly* for entertainment (perhaps, we've forgotten our cellphones at home), and we read a textbook for information.

But the essay is a completely different creature. A well-written essay seeks our engagement. It is an interaction. The essay lives inside a conversation, and the text invites us, as readers, to join that conversation.

Let's evolve the metaphor: A well-written essay is like a living object we can lift and rotate, probe and inquire. We can know the essay. Gradually, layer after layer, we make it ours, and we do this through engaged and active reading.

When we engage a text we remember more of it, but even better, we more honestly learn about ourselves and we more honestly learn about the world in which we live. Through active reading we evolve our positions in the world, and we evolve the conversation. We may read a text three or more times and each time, discover something new. A good essay can be like that.

1. Before you read

TAKE A SECOND TO INVESTIGATE. This step is more intuitive than you may think. It involves flipping through the pages. The "How long is this?"/"What am I in for?" kind of scan. Acknowledge the *circumstantial evidence* (What circumstances prompted your reading? Why are you reading the essay?) You can also consider the surrounding context. In what form or publication was the essay originally published? Note the implied audience. Note the year. Note the author's credentials and/or any other biographical details.

2. While you read

REMAIN ACTIVELY ENGAGED, AS IF IN A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR AND THE WORLD AT LARGE. The folks at Harvard advise you to throw out your highlighters and to take out your pens. Read from a paper—not a screen—with a pen in your hand. Write in the margins. Write in the space between the lines. Talk back. Ask questions. Underline and exclaim. Don't stop thinking.

Note places where the text confuses you, inspires you, angers you. Notice word choices, and how language can influence your emotions and judgment. Notice any leaps in logic. If you find a metaphor, investigate it. What are that metaphor's strengths? What are its weaknesses?

Leave your mark on the text. You will develop your own system. I like big black dots and stars. Wavy lines and arrows. Asterisks. You may like something else. Your symbols and notes will not only help you when you revisit the text in search of a specific passage or idea—but also intensify and reinforce your reading experience.

Try to plainly write, in your own words what the author is saying. Do this one paragraph at a time, and then ask yourself how you feel about what the author is saying.

Try to parcel fact from opinion and ask yourself what the writer wants his or her reader to accept as true. Take note of unspoken (often hidden) assumptions. Is there an abstraction the writer defines for you? Do you agree with the writer's values and/or morality? What evidence does the writer supply? Note anecdotes as anecdotes and empower yourself to cite your own. Note the sample sizes of studies.

And if you don't know a reference, ask. You can ask me or your roommate or a parent. Ask a dictionary or Wiki. Or Siri. Or Google. Just ask. It always feels better to know.

3. After you've read.

Revisit your preliminary investigating. What do those observations mean now that you have read the piece? You may notice something new. Have your thoughts or feelings changed? Shifted? If so, how much?

Do you feel more convicted about something? Less? Is there a specific fact that stands out to you? A feeling that lingers? Take a minute to jot down your immediate thoughts. A few sentences will do. Does the essay remind you of another text, lecture, film, podcast, play, painting, song, or experience? If so, how does it relate? Has the essay altered how you feel about these other texts (or lectures or films or podcasts or experiences)?

4. Annotation: In Summary

Practice marking the text to **retain, understand, discover, challenge, and connect.**

1. Imagine you are in a conversation. (Read the situation before you dive in.)
2. Identify and look up words you do not know.
3. React with your pencil. Write *Yay!* and *Boo!*, and elaborate when inspired.
4. Ask questions. Be curious and critical. (Why? What about this?)
5. Make connections (to self, text, and world) and write them down in the margins.
6. Note key ideas. Underline and rewrite them in your own words.
7. It can also help to note the writer's choices! Notice how they advance or deliver their argument. How effective are their rhetorical moves?