

Guidelines for Reading and Writing in HIS 301

Adapted from David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, "Introduction: Ways of Reading," in *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Readers*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 1-18.

Making a Mark

Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say. In fact, one of the difficult things about reading is that the pages before you will begin to speak only when the authors are silent and you begin to speak in their place, sometimes for them--doing their work, continuing their projects--and sometimes for yourself, following your own agenda.

This is an unusual way to talk about reading, we know. We have not mentioned finding information or locating an author's purpose or identifying main ideas, useful though these skills are, because the purpose of this class is to offer you occasions to imagine other ways of reading and thinking about the world. Think of reading as a social interaction--sometimes peaceful and polite, sometimes not so peaceful and polite.

We'd like you to imagine that when you read the works we've collected here, somebody is saying something to you, and we'd like you to imagine that you are in a position to speak back, to say something of your own in turn. In other words, we are not presenting this material as a miniature library (a place to find information) and we do not think of you, the reader, as a term-paper writer (a person looking for information to write down on three-by-five-cards).

When you read, you hear an author's voice as you move along; you believe a person with something to say is talking to you. You pay attention, even when you don't completely understand what is being said, trusting that it will all make sense in the end, relating what the author says to what you already know or expect to hear or learn. Even if you don't grasp everything you are reading at every moment (and you won't), and even if you don't remember everything you've read (no reader does--at least not in long, complex pieces), you begin to see the outlines of the author's project, the patterns and rhythms of that particular way of seeing and interpreting the world.

When you stop to talk or write about what you've read, the author is silent; you take over--it is your turn to write, to begin to respond to what the author said. At that point this author and his or her text become something you construct out of what you remember or what you notice as you go back through the text a second time, working from passages or examples but filtering them through your own predisposition to see or read in particular ways.

Reading, in other words, can be the occasion for you to put things together, to notice this idea or theme rather than that one, to follow a writer's announced or secret ends while simultaneously following your own. When this happens, when you forge a reading of a story or an essay, you make your mark on it, casting it in your own terms. But the story makes its mark on you as well, teaching you not only about a subject but also about a way of seeing and understanding a subject. The text provides the opportunity for you to see through someone else's powerful language, to imagine your own familiar settings through the images, metaphors, and ideas of others.

Readers learn to put things together by writing. It is not something you can do, at least not to any degree, while you are reading. It requires that you work on what you have read, and that work best takes shape when you sit down to write. To write about a story or essay, you go back to what you have read to find phrases or passages that define what for you are the key moments, that help you interpret sections that seem difficult or troublesome or mysterious. If you are writing an essay of your own, the work that you are doing gives a purpose and structure to that rereading.

Writing also, however, gives you a way of going back to work on the text of your own reading. It allows you to be self-critical. You can revise not just to make your essay neat or tight or tidy but to see what kind of reader you have been, to examine the pattern and consequences in the choices you have made. Revision, in other words, gives you the chance to work on your essay, but it also gives you an opportunity to work on your reading--to qualify or extend or question your interpretation of a text.

Ways of Reading

A danger arises in assuming that reading is only a search for information or main ideas. There are ways of thinking through problems and working with written texts which are essential to academic life, but which are not represented by summary and paraphrase or by note-taking and essay exams.

Student readers, for example, can take responsibility for determining the meaning of the text. They can work as though they were doing something other than finding ideas already there on the page and they can be guided by their own impressions or questions as they read. We are not talking about finding hidden meanings. If such things as hidden meanings can be said to exist, they are hidden by readers' habits and prejudices (by readers' assumptions that what they read should tell them what they already know), or by readers' timidity and passivity (by their unwillingness to take the responsibility to speak their minds and say what they notice).

Reading to locate meaning in the text places a premium on memory, yet a strong reader is not necessarily a person with a good memory. Students who read as a memory test end up worrying about bits and pieces (bits and pieces they could go back and find if they had to) and turn their attention away from the more pressing problem of how to make sense of a difficult or ambiguous passage.

A reader who needs to have access to something in the essay can use simple memory aids. A reader can go back and scan, for one thing, to find passages or examples that might be worth reconsidering. Or a reader can construct a personal index, making marks in the margin, under-lining passages that seem interesting or mysterious or difficult. A mark is a way of saying, "This is something I might want to work on later." If you mark the selections in these readings as you read them, you will give yourself a working record of what, at the first moment of reading, you felt might be worth a second reading.

The meaning of an essay or book is something you develop as you go along, something for which you must take final responsibility. The meaning is forged from reading the essay, to be sure, but it is determined by what you do with the essay, by the connections you can make and your explanation of why those connections are important.

If an essay or book is not the sum of its parts but something you as a reader create by putting together those parts that seem to matter personally, then the way to begin, once you have read a selection is by reviewing what you recall, by going back to those places that stick in your memory -- or to those sections you marked with checks or notes in the margins. You begin by seeing what you can make of these memories and notes. You should realize that with books and essays as long and complex as those in this course, you will never feel, after a single reading, as though you have command of everything you read. This is not a problem. This sense of incompleteness is part of the experience of reading serious work. And it is part of the experience of a strong reader. No reader could retain one of these books in her mind, no matter how proficient her memory or how experienced she might be. No reader, at least no reader we would trust, would admit, for instance, that he understood everything that Osterhammel, DiGirolamo, or Masten had to say. What strong readers know is that they have to begin, and they have to begin regardless of their doubts or hesitations. What you have after your first reading of an essay or book is a starting place, and you begin with your marked passages or examples or notes, with questions to answer, or with problems to solve. Strong readings, in other words, put a premium on individual acts of attention and composition.

Strong Readers, Strong Texts

There is a paradox here. On the one hand, these books are rich, magnificent, too big for anyone to completely grasp all at once, and before them, as before inspiring spectacles, it seems appropriate to stand humbly, admiringly. And yet, on the other hand, a reader must speak with authority.

In "The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books." What Emerson offers here is not a fact but an attitude. There is creative reading, he says, as well as creative writing. It is up to you to treat authors as your equals, as people who will allow you to speak too. At the same time, you must respect the difficulty and complexity of their texts and of the issues and questions they examine.

Reading With and Against the Grain

Reading, then, requires a difficult mix of authority and humility. On the one hand, a reader takes charge of a text; on the other, a reader gives generous attention to someone else's (a writer's) key terms and methods, commits his time to her examples, tries to think in her language, imagines that this strange work is important, compelling, at least for the moment. Here we are saying, in effect, read your world in her terms. Notice what she would notice. Ask the questions she would ask. Try out her conclusions.

To read generously, to work inside someone else's system, to see your world in someone else's terms--we call this "reading with the grain." It is a way of working *with* a writer's ideas, in conjunction with someone else's text. As a way of reading, it can take different forms. You will sometimes be asked to summarize and paraphrase, to put others' ideas into your terms, to provide your account of what they are saying. This is a way of getting a tentative or provisional hold on a text, its examples and ideas; it allows you a place to begin to work.

We have also asked students to read against the grain, to read critically, to turn back, for example, against an author's project, to ask questions they believe might come as a surprise, to look for the limits of a writer's vision, to provide alternate readings of his examples, to find examples that challenge his argument, to engage him, in other words, in dialogue.

Many of the books in this course are examples of writers working against the grain of historical tradition, common sense, or everyday language. They are examples of writers making an effort to work against the grain of a selected past, of standard understanding, of habitual ways of representing what is important to know or what it means to know something, to be somebody, to speak before others. As a strong reader you work to recognize the author's effort and as a strong writer you make an effort to work against the grain yourself. It is important to read generously and carefully and to learn to submit to projects that others have begun. But it is also important to understand where this work comes from, whose interests it serves, how and where it is kept together by will rather than desire, and what it might have to do with you. To fail to ask the fundamental questions--Where am I in this? How can I make my mark? Whose interests are represented? What can I learn by reading with or against the grain? --is to mistake skill for understanding, and it is to misunderstand the goals of a liberal education.

Making Connections

Strong readers, we've said, remake what they have read to serve their own ends, putting things together, figuring out how ideas and examples relate, explaining as best they can material that is difficult or problematic, translating phrases and key terms into their own language. At these moments, it is hard to distinguish the act of reading from the act of writing. In fact, the connection between reading and writing can be seen as almost a literal one, since the best way you can show your reading of a rich and dense essay or book is by writing down your thoughts, placing one idea against another, commenting on what you've done, taking examples into account, looking back at where you began, perhaps changing your mind, and moving on.

Readers, however, seldom read a single essay in isolation, as though their only job were to arrive at some sense of what an essay has to say. Although we couldn't begin to provide examples of all the various uses of reading in academic life, it is often the case that readings provide information and direction for investigative projects, whether they are philosophical or scientific in nature. The books and essays in this course will point you in certain directions, give you ideas to work with, and hopefully challenge you to see one writer's ideas through another's.

Strong readers often read critically, weighing, for example, an author's claims and interpretations against evidence--evidence provided by the author in the text, evidence drawn from other sources, or the evidence that is assumed to be part of a reader's own knowledge and experience. A reader extends the argument of an essay by trying out an author's method of analysis and set of key terms or examples of her own, continuing his argument as though she were working with him on a common project, or she can test his argument to see where and how it will not work.

Readers, as we have said, seldom read an essay in isolation, as though, having once worked out a reading they could go on to something else, something unrelated. It is unusual for anyone, at least in an academic setting, to read in so random a fashion. Readers read most often because they have a project in hand--a question they are working on or a problem they are trying to solve. In that case, when you read and take an interest in an author's method or terms, you begin to notice things you would not have noticed before. You start to read other essays, books, or evidence through the frame provided by that author.

By making connections in these ways, by framing or looking at one author's work through the terms and methods of another, you will begin to leave behind the old paraphrase, summarize, or compare and contrast method of writing and instead use one text as the context for interpreting another. For some of the weeks of this course you will work with two or more readings at a time, but even on weeks where there is only one book to read follow these directions. The purpose of all the readings and assignments is to demonstrate how any text we read -- a historical monograph, theoretical essay, even a primary source -- can be used as a frame for interpreting another text. This can be exciting work, and it demonstrates a basic principle of liberal arts education: to give students the opportunity to adopt different points of view, including those of scholars and writers who have helped to shape modern thought. This kind of reading and writing gives you the chance, even as an undergraduate student, to try your hand at the work of professionals.