

How to Read Before You Write

Effective Reading Strategies

As mentioned in the opening chapter, reading strategies come in many different forms. A good reading strategy will always be constructed upon the goals for reading. Reading for a college course is obviously different than reading a murder mystery. The latter is read for fun. The former is read for information. Yet beyond reading for information, there is always a higher purpose. You must ask yourself the following:

What is the point of the article and/or author?

Why am I reading this? (your purpose separate from the writer's purpose or point)

While the first question is an old one, the second question will help guide your thoughts as you read. Here are some potential answers to the second question:

1. You may be reading to introduce yourself to a subject you will discuss in class.
2. You may be reading to learn more about a subject already introduced in class.
3. You may be reading to learn about a sub-field related to previous class readings.
4. You may be reading an article that complicates a theory or opinion you have already read in class.
5. You may be reading material already covered in class in an attempt to “own” the knowledge.

There are many more reasons to read inside of each of these oversimplified categories. The type of things that you concentrate on and write in your notes should reflect your knowledge of the subject. If you are not familiar with the subject, you must remember the basic framework of the subject. This may be the “story” of how a scientific theory or mathematical equation works, start to finish. Or it may be the “story” of how merchant's diaries across several centuries can tell us about changes in American history or the American mindset. Or it may be the “story” of how a society's music holds in it the values of that society itself. But if the subject is not familiar, you are reading so that you can repeat, in your own words, the basic outline (start to finish) of the explanation or argument you have read.

If you are reading on a subject already familiar to you, then you may be reading “against” the text or reading to “doubt.” That is, you may be reading to find holes in the argument. While this may be tough in some subjects (the sciences), more philosophical classes will thrive on you reading “against” an opinion. You will be expected to create counterarguments or find arguable evidence as you go. Or you may be reading to better master the intricacies of material you already know. College courses are designed this way in general. You learn the basics, then you learn sub-areas to fill in your growing knowledge. While a list of “things to do” when reading cannot radically change how you are used to reading, good readers are made, not born, and no one but yourself can remind you *why* you are reading.

You will often times encounter new information and different types of argument and organization, and your purpose for reading may not always be clear. When this happens, you may read an entire night, yet not really remember much of what you read. Your verbal summary may take no more than several seconds, and you'll wonder how an hour's reading resulted in such

a small summary. Part of the reason for this is the human brain. It cannot remember everything. However, focusing on a framework—the “story” or sequence your reading presents—will help. Repeating as much of the story or sequence as you can, mid-reading, will help lock up the new information in your memory. Good notetaking aids this process. Repeating the story or sequence as if it is yours will undo the experience of feeling blank after an hour’s worth of reading. You will have begun to own the knowledge, and it will feel like your knowledge, not the essay author’s knowledge.

Not all instructors may be exemplary in telling you why you are reading and how this new knowledge combines with older knowledge. Some instructors prefer, to some extent, to keep you unprejudiced in your reading. This can be helpful because your instructors are not leading you toward certain conclusions. You can always ask what will be important in a reading ahead of time. However, taking control of your reading strategy is your best bet. One basic mode of reading is comparing and contrasting. Why? Because our brains take in all new knowledge by assimilating it with old relevant knowledge. Before reading, you wish to jot down notes or simply take a moment and think about what you know about the subject of the assigned reading. If there is nothing on your mind when you begin reading, there most likely won’t be as much on your mind when you finish reading.

Knowing how to find the framework, story, or sequence may not require reading straight through an article or essay. You can sometimes use your communicational knowledge to move around and get the gist of a reading before you read it closely. If you do this, you may be approximating reading something twice because you are understanding the basics before you begin reading closely.

Choosing Criteria for Reading Strategies

Although there are many strategies, each of them dependent upon your purposes and goals, having a process will help. In addition to answering the *why am I reading* question, ask yourself:

- A. What do I know about this subject?
- B. What type of piece is this (genre, structure, prose style)? Based on the field it comes from, how will the information most likely appear? How can I use this to my advantage?
- C. How will I remember and categorize new information?

Answering these questions may lead you to the most helpful strategy. Some reading strategies are listed below. In addition to asking yourself if the following are efficient ways of reading, ask yourself if there are potential problems in each reading strategy.

1. Read essay straight through, no rereading
2. Read essay without a pencil
3. Read introduction and conclusion first
4. Read only for topic sentences
5. Read for topic sentences first (scanning). Reread thoroughly after you have working knowledge of the subject of the article or essay.

I would suggest that Number Two is a bad idea. Number One is most likely impossible. We all loop back to reread, and this is good for the memory and understanding. Note taking is an essential aid to your memory, and as you know, your memory is all too human. If you sometimes forget where your car keys are, why would your memory remember all the stories and sequences of college learning unless you actively ask it to do so? Repeating these stories and taking notes are your best bets to retaining information for later use. Looking ahead to main ideas, rather than backward, can help you understand the logic or sequence of an essay’s content whenever you are

How to Read Before You Write

feeling lost or wondering what the point is. Unlike murder mysteries, reading the last page first does not spoil the reading. Instead, you may have a better idea what you are reading for in the first place.

Texts: Patterns, Structures, and Signposts

Certain terminology surrounds writing. Become familiar with this terminology. It will help you discuss your own writing, your peers' writing, and classroom reading assignments. Different essays will have different forms of these terms, but the patterns, structures, and signposts of writing will always be there. The goal is to make these terms yours. For that, you'll need to be able to describe them to yourself and others in your own language. You may wish to discuss as a class what the working definitions and limits of these writing features:

- Thesis
- Topic sentence
- Subordination
- Main idea
- Secondary idea
- Support/evidence
- Expert opinion
- Facts/data
- Testimony
- Transition
- Direct statement
- Indirect statement
- Audience
- Purpose
- Personal knowledge
- Research knowledge

Genre Excerpts With Exercises:

Let's look at the following texts and text excerpts. I have selected each text because it is unique from the others; yet each essay contains all or some from the above list of writing features. Also, to challenge you, many of these essays are missing the bulk of their information. Why? Because I want you to decide on an effective reading strategy before you simply "dive in" and start reading. Each essay contains features that can stop a reader cold in their tracks if that reader is looking for immediate understanding or to "just start reading." After scanning or reading each text or excerpt, stop and think for a moment about the challenges it provides to a reader who reads for information and argument.

So try two things as you read: First, try out various reading strategies from section C above; second, apply the terms from "Patterns, Structures, and Signposts" to specific sections of the essay. This second idea will create discussion of genre, which is highly important when choosing an appropriate reading strategy.

Essay #1:

The following essay is an anthropological essay.

Opening of Essay #1:

PARENTAL SELECTION: A THIRD SELECTION PROCESS IN THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN HAIRLESSNESS AND SKIN COLOR

Judith Rich Harris

“I don’t want to kill her. This little girl is too beautiful. See how lovely and fair her skin is?” (1)

Those words were spoken shortly after childbirth by an African woman named Chuko, a member of the hunter-gatherer people known as the !Kung. The story was told to an anthropologist by Chuko’s daughter, Nisa. Chuko had planned to kill the newborn – by burying it before it took its first breath – because her previous child, Nisa’s younger brother Kumsa, was too young to be weaned. Rearing the new baby would thus jeopardize Kumsa’s chances of survival. But when Chuko saw the new baby she had a change of heart. The baby was allowed to live and she did indeed grow into a beautiful girl.

Marjorie Shostak, the anthropologist who recorded Nisa’s story, explained that infanticide (now against the law) was until recently the only reliable method available to !Kung women for spacing their babies. The !Kung were not unusual in their use of this draconian method of birth control. According to the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, “Infanticide has been practiced in all the world’s cultures” (2). In former times deciding whether to keep the newborn was often the first decision a mother had to make after she gave birth. But the decision was never made lightly, and a particularly appealing newborn had at least a slim hope of changing its mother’s mind. The ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt described another such incident: an Eipo woman who had decided in advance to abandon the baby if it should be a girl but changed her mind after her daughter was born (3). [...]

Closing of Essay #1:

My hypothesis about the evolution of pale skin is a good deal more difficult to test. No one doubts that this change must have occurred after members of our species occupied Europe and Asia; as far as I know, no one doubts that it occurred after our species developed language and culture. Thus, my hypothesis does not differ from prevailing views in regard to timing. Soft-tissue evidence from frozen ice men will be of no use.

Evidence will therefore have to be sought in a roundabout way. For example, I asserted that light skin provided no survival benefits to the ancestors of modern-day Europeans. If it is found that modern light-skinned humans have longer or healthier lives than their darker-skinned neighbors, at least at some latitudes, that would be evidence against my hypothesis. Another prediction is that females should, on average, have lighter skin than males. There already appears to be enough evidence that light-skinned females win higher-quality mates – males with higher status – than their darker-skinned sisters.

Alas, the beautiful fair-skinned baby whom Nisa’s mother decided to rear, rather than kill, cannot provide us with any evidence, pro or con. Kxamshe, as she was called, died in her early teens, apparently of malaria.

Instructor and Student Questions for Essay #1:

1. From only this article’s opening, can you predict the argument of this article?
2. Would you consider the opening paragraph a “straight-ahead” and direct statement on the evolution of pale skin?
3. Would you consider the closing paragraph a “straight-ahead” and direct statement on the evolution of pale skin?
4. To what extent are these complications dependent on the author’s choice in presenting information on a single case study about a mother and child? If there were statistics on pale skin evolution, rather than a single mother and child, would the introduction be more understandable?

How to Read Before You Write

5. If someone were lost during this or a similarly arranged essay, what reading strategy would you suggest they use?

Essay #2:

EMPLOYMENT PREFERENCES AND SALARY EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS IN SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING

By Dorceta Taylor

The number of students pursuing degrees in science and engineering (S&E) has grown over the last two decades. During that time, our ability to track changes and predict enrollment trends has improved. Consequently, there are reliable data on the number of students enrolling in and graduating from S&E and other higher education programs. There is also a robust body of data and publications on employment trends and workforce characteristics in S&E fields (CAWMSET 2000, NSF 2000, NSB 2006). Nonetheless, there are scant data on the employment preferences and salary expectations of S&E students (NSF 2001). As a result, we know little about what kinds of workplaces current S&E students are willing to work in and what kinds of salaries they expect to earn when they enter the workforce. This article focuses on the employment preferences and salary expectations of four-year college and university students in life sciences and other S&E programs nationwide.

Instructor and Student Questions for essay #2:

1. Based upon their openings, which article, #1 or #2, has more predictable arguments, claims, and information that will be presented?
2. Can you, to some extent, predict the structure or outline of the essay's "body"?
3. Can you predict the opinion or "findings" the closing will state?
4. What reasons would the authors have for presenting their information in these different ways?
5. How does the presentation of information change the "tone" of the piece? Is one style easier to read solely for remembering main ideas?
6. How will you know which style to choose in your own writing assignments?

Essay #3:

COLD BACON AND SPAM

By Liberty Kohn

I am Fred
I am Fred
Fred who is out of his head.

That Fred in his head.
That Fred in his head.

He does not like
cold breakfast
with the fam.

He does not like cold bacon
and spam.

I do not like them,
says I,
Fred the head.

Would I like them
up or down?

I would not like them
up or down.
I would not like them
with a clown.
I would not like them
in outer space.
I would not eat them
to win a race.
Cold bacon and spam,
side by side,
I would rather whither away,
or eat them fried.

Questions of Essay #3:

1. Is there information being distributed in this piece, or is this only nonsense?
2. Does it have an argument? Does it have an opening thesis, closing statement, etc.? Would you categorize the thesis as direct or indirect?
3. Are there types of evidence in this piece to support a thesis?

Essay #4:

JUSTICE THOMAS CARRIES THE DAY
USA TODAY
July 5, 2007 Thursday
FINAL EDITION
Tony Marou

A week has passed, yet the memory of what transpired at the Supreme Court on June 28 remains vivid.

Usually a staid and solemn place, the court produced high drama that morning as announced a landmark ruling curtailing the use of race in assigning students to one public school or another in pursuit of diversity. There was drama in what could be seen, and in what was invisible, as well.

As the court announced perhaps the most significant race case in a decade, the court's only African-American justice, was barely visible — literally. He sits next to Justice Stephen Breyer, and the two can often be seen chatting amiably. But as Breyer read his angry dissent, accusing the majority of turning its back on decades of civil rights precedents, I looked up to see how Thomas was reacting — and could not see him.

At first, I thought Thomas had left the bench. But Thomas was there, it turns out; he had just pushed his chair back so far that he was almost behind Breyer, well out of view. It was as though Thomas did not want to be seen in the same photo frame with Breyer — except, of course, photos are not allowed

How to Read Before You Write

in the court anyway.

Thomas' invisibility on the bench was matched in the media coverage that ensued. We all wrote about the influence of Roberts and his fellow Bush-appointed newcomer, Samuel Alito, both in the majority. We focused also on Justice Anthony Kennedy, whose middle-ground concurring opinion could ultimately dictate the impact of the decision. Kennedy's opinion only highlighted the media focus on his role as the crucial swing vote on the court.

But these analyses might miss a larger point about the court, and about the influence of Justice Thomas. The court's decision on June 28 marks a cultural as well as a legal turning point on the issue of race, and conservative Thomas probably deserves more credit — or blame — than anyone has yet recognized. After 16 years on the court — often spent as invisible as he was last week — Thomas' disdain for affirmative action, and his skepticism about the value of integrated schools, carried the day.

When Thomas' predecessor, the civil rights titan Thurgood Marshall, died in 1993, his colleagues paid him tribute by talking about the power of his storytelling within the private discussions of the justices. Marshall would inject an anecdote from his youth or his days as an NAACP litigator into his conversations, giving his colleagues a steady and powerful proof that, as he often said, he never had to look at his hand to remind himself that he was black.

Questions of Essay #4:

1. Is the thesis statement here direct or indirect? Whether direct or indirect, write the thesis statement here: _____

2. How is the information presented? Is the argument presented as objective, real-world, researched information, or is the argument presented as highly personal opinion? Where can you identify passages in the essay's opening to support your answer?
3. What reading strategy works best to make sense of this essay?
4. What areas of knowledge does this piece assume of the reader?
5. What information seems secondary and of interest only to those that have background knowledge of race issues and political standing in the Supreme Court's justices?

Essay #5:

FROM FANTASY TO FAITH: MORALITY, RELIGION AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

by D.Z. Phillips, 2006. London, SCM, pp. 240. ISBN 0 334 04028 0 (pbk).

Review by Liberty Kohn

When he passed in August 2006 at the age of 71, philosopher Dewi Zephaniah Phillips had garnered an international reputation for his contributions as a member of the Swansea school of philosophy. Based in Wittgenstein's moral philosophy, Phillips continually resisted ideas that morality and moral philosophy should be enmeshed in human purposes, be they humdrum human happiness or Panglossian battlelines over catastrophe and divine responsibility: Discussion of morality and faith shouldn't be bound to external justifications. Phillips questioned the limits of philosophical skepticism, in particular skeptical language's ability to address matters beyond truth-value. Although open to criticisms

of Wittgensteinian fideism then and now, Phillips should be remembered as a champion of religious faith in a sometimes hostile intellectual environment, as an advocate of religious discussion without the encumbrance of its philosophical material ties, and as a proponent of literature's ability to transmit the values of both humanism and spiritual faith.

Originally released in 1991 and produced in a 2006 second edition, Phillips' *From Fantasy to Faith: Morality, Religion and Twentieth-Century Literature* is a vehicle for his continuing philosophy calling for a divorce of philosophy and theology, as well as an assessment of skepticism's effects on literature and the purposes of literary reading. Yet Phillips designed this collection around the explication of literature, twenty-one essays on twenty-one authors, allowing for discussion and exemplification of the variety of ways literary language provides a less limited discourse for discussions of faith and morality. Thus, the book is interesting because it does not read as a manifesto or tome. Phillips' critical method is in the vein of the interpretative strategy for which he argues, a secular-exegesis-returning-the-sacred-to-literature, which he provides through his rereading of literature from throughout the century.

In Part One of the book, 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', Phillips endeavors 'to give full weight to the pervasive intellectual view in Western culture that, by now, we should have put aside the inherent childishness of religious belief' (p. x). Phillips suggests that neither intellectualism, artistic creation nor artistic appreciation can be inclusive for an entire populace, leading Phillips to looming questions: Do we need charitable untruths to get us through a turbulent life? Is religion this type of beneficial, requisite and inclusive untruth? [...]

Questions of Essay #5:

1. What genre is this? What, then, are your expectations for information? What author or text will information come from?
2. What types of knowledge does this piece expect of the reader? Does this give you a clue as to whether it is a general or specialist audience?
3. As a general reader, not an expert reader, what parts made you feel "clued in" where you could begin to understand information in the piece? Where were you lost? What reasons can you identify for being lost? Are they based in language and vocabulary?
4. Does the author provide signals that help highlight or explain important information in these paragraphs?

Questions of all essays:

1. Did some strategies work better than others for reading certain genres?
2. Did any one reading strategy work all the time?
3. If no one strategy works all the time, what can you do to make challenging readings easier?
4. Can you, in a mix of my terminology and your own, explain the various obstacles to meaning that occurred in this essay?

My goals in this chapter have been to introduce you to how reading strategy depends upon each unique reading you encounter. To do this, I chose five radically different types of genres and styles in hope that you would see two things: First, these five texts' differences require different reading strategies, with each strategy dependent upon the organization and style of the writing itself. Second, I want you to see that despite their differences, they still share the "parts" of writing (thesis, evidence, audience, etc.). In the end, your familiarity with the subject, the number of times you've read the piece, the density of the language, the way in which the author tells the "story," and your own purposes for reading all contribute to *how* you formulate a reading strategy.