Interrogating Texts: 6 Reading Habits to Develop in Your First Year at Harvard

Critical reading--active engagement and interaction with texts--is essential to your academic success at Harvard, and to your intellectual growth. Research has shown that students who read deliberately retain more information and retain it longer. Your college reading assignments will probably be more substantial and more sophisticated than those you are used to from high school. The amount of reading will almost certainly be greater. College students rarely have the luxury of successive re-readings of material, either, given the pace of life in and out of the classroom.

While the strategies below are (for the sake of clarity) listed sequentially, you can probably do most of them simultaneously. They may feel awkward at first, and you may have to deploy them very consciously, especially if you are not used to doing anything more than moving your eyes across the page. But they will quickly become habits, and you will notice the difference—in what you "see" in a reading, and in the confidence with which you approach your texts.

1. **Previewing: <u>Look "around" the text before you start reading</u>.**

   You've probably engaged in one version of previewing in the past, when you've tried to determine how long an assigned reading is (and how much time and energy, as a result, it will demand from you). But you can learn a great deal more about the organization and purpose of a text by taking note of features other than its length.

   Previewing enables you to develop a set of ***expectations about the scope and aim*** of the text. These very preliminary impressions offer you a way to focus your reading. For instance:

   - What does the presence of ***headnotes***, an ***abstract***, or other ***prefatory material*** tell you?
   - Is the ***author*** known to you already? If so, how does his (or her) ***reputation*** or ***credentials*** influence your perception of what you are about to read? If the author is unfamiliar or unknown, does an editor introduce him or her (by supplying brief biographical information, an assessment of the author's work, concerns, and importance)?
   - How does the disposition or ***layout of a text*** prepare you for reading? Is the material broken into parts--subtopics, sections, or the like? Are there long and unbroken blocks of text or smaller paragraphs or "chunks" and what does this suggest? How might the parts of a text guide you toward understanding the line of inquiry or the arc of the argument that's being made?

   - Does the text seem to be arranged according to ***certain conventions of discourse***? Newspaper articles, for instance, have characteristics that you will recognize; textbooks and scholarly essays are organized quite differently Texts demand different things of you as you read, so whenever you can, register the type of information you're presented with.

2. **Annotating: <u>Make your reading thinking-intensive from start to finish.</u>**

   Annotating puts you actively and immediately in a ***"dialogue" with an author and the issues and ideas you encounter*** in a written text. It's also a way to have an ongoing conversation with yourself as you move through the text and to record what that encounter was like for you. Here's how:

   - ***Throw away your highlighter:*** Highlighting can seem like an active reading strategy, but it can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. Those bright yellow lines you put on a printed page one day can seem strangely cryptic the next, unless you have a method for remembering why they were important to you at another moment in time. Pen or pencil will allow you do to more *to* a text you have to wrestle with.

   - ***Mark up the margins of your text with words and phrases:*** ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or course themes. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the *reasons* you are reading as well as the *purposes* your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a test or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.

   - ***Develop your own symbol system:*** asterisk (*) a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point (!) for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. Your personalized set of hieroglyphs allow you to capture the important -- and often fleeting -- insights that occur to you as you're reading. Like notes in your margins, they'll prove indispensable when you return to a text in search of that perfect passage to use in a paper, or are preparing for a big exam.

   - ***Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions:*** "What does this mean?" "Why is the writer drawing that conclusion?" "Why am I being asked to read this text?" etc. Write the questions down (in your margins, at the beginning or end of the reading, in a notebook, or elsewhere. They are reminders of the unfinished business you still

have with a text: something to ask during class discussion, or to come to terms with on your own, once you've had a chance to digest the material further or have done other course reading.

3. **Outline, summarize, analyze: Take the information apart, look at its parts, and then try to put it back together again in language that is meaningful to you**.

   The best way to determine that you've really gotten the point is to be able to state it in your own words.

   Outlining the argument of a text is a version of annotating, and can be done quite informally in the margins of the text, unless you prefer the more formal Roman numeral model you may have learned in high school. **Outlining** enables you to see the skeleton of an argument: the thesis, the first point and evidence (and so on), through the conclusion. With weighty or difficult readings, that skeleton may not be obvious until you go looking for it.

   Summarizing accomplishes something similar, but in sentence and paragraph form, and with the connections between ideas made explicit.

   Analyzing adds an evaluative component to the summarizing process—it requires you not just to restate main ideas, but also to test the logic, credibility, and emotional impact of an argument. In analyzing a text, you reflect upon and decide how effectively (or poorly) its argument has been made. Questions to ask:

   - What is the writer asserting?
   - What am I being asked to believe or accept? Facts? Opinions? Some mixture?
   - What reasons or evidence does the author supply to convince me? Where is the strongest or most effective evidence the author offers -- and why is it compelling?

4. **Look for repetitions and patterns:**

The way ***language is chosen, used, positioned in a text*** can be important indication of what an author considers crucial and what he expects you to glean from his argument. It can also alert you to ideological positions, hidden agendas or biases. Be watching for:

- Recurring images
- Repeated words, phrases, types of examples, or illustrations
- Consistent ways of characterizing people, events, or issues

5. **Contextualize:** Once you've finished reading actively and annotating, ***take stock for a moment and put it in perspective.***

When you contextualize, you essential ***"re-view" a text you've encountered, framed by its historical, cultural, material, or intellectual circumstances.***

- When was it written or where was it published? Do these factors change or otherwise influence how you view a piece?

Also view the reading through the lens of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is always shaped by what you have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place.

6. **Compare and Contrast: Set course readings against each other to determine their relationships (hidden or explicit).**

- At what point in the term does this reading come? Why that point, do you imagine?
- How does it contribute to the main concepts and themes of the course?
- How does it compare (or contrast) to the ideas presented by texts that come before it? Does it continue a trend, shift direction, or expand the focus of previous readings?
- How has your thinking been altered by this reading? How has it affected your response to the issues and themes of the course?

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