

ATLAS Reading Strategies

Managing the demands of heavy reading loads is one of the challenges of the academic transition to Notre Dame. Learning new reading strategies can be a key to success.

Table of Contents

- [Tips from Historians for Reading Scholarly Works Efficiently](#)
 - [Reading Strategies from a Professor in the Program of Liberal Studies \(Notre Dame's Great Books Program\)](#)
 - [Reading a Scientific Paper Effectively](#)
-

Tips from Historians for Reading Scholarly Works Efficiently

Thank you to Notre Dame history professors Dan Graff and Jake Lundberg for providing this reference!

- 1) Read for the big picture, the big ideas, and the main argument. Periodically reflect as you read to make sure you understand the main argument.
- 2) Do not get lost in the details - particularly in secondary sources. The metaphorical expression "Can't see the forest for the trees" refers to the negative tendency by some readers to miss the big picture by focusing too closely on the minutiae of a story. Don't focus on the trees . . . focus on seeing the forest!
- 3) Write down what you think the main argument is and then only jot down major points you want to remember -- that is, major points that support the argument.
- 4) Recognize that every piece of expression - whether it's an academic article or a work of fiction - *has* a perspective. It has an argument. It is trying to persuade the reader of something. Look for that. Understand that the details are there in the service of that act of persuasion.
- 5) If you want to look at specific details, then think about how the author is using those details. In other words, in trying to understand an argument or interpretation, you should think about **HOW** the author is making that argument.
- 6) One strategy for handling large amounts of reading is to start by reading the piece's introduction and conclusion, and then stop and think if you understand the author's argument. If you do not, then go back and reread the introduction and conclusion until you do. Then write down the main argument in your own words.

- 7) When reading nonfiction/academic work, look for clues to the author's argument in introductions, beginnings and endings of sections, topic sentences, and conclusions. If the person is a good writer (which is not always certain), then they should be doing the reader favors by making their key points clear at the beginning and at the end of things.
- 8) Once you have understood the argument, you can read the body of the piece with more confidence, seeking greater understanding of how the author supports the argument. Just write down important points or any questions you might have.
- 9) You can use this strategy for entire books (intro/preface, conclusion/epilogue), essays (intro and concluding paragraphs), individual chapters within books, and even sections within a chapter.
- 10) Once you get the hang of it, you will be reading more efficiently. You will also be building on your growing knowledge of both the topic of the reading AND the art and science of reading itself.

Reading Strategies from a Professor in the Program of Liberal Studies (Notre Dame's Great Books Program)

Thank you to Notre Dame professor Eric Bugyis for providing this reference!

I tell students a few things when they ask me about reading strategies.

1. Make sure that you start early and are relatively fresh and free of distractions. Don't try to read and check your email or social media or watch a video at the same time. You would think this is obvious, but students often are not consciously aware of distractions! Research has shown that it can take around 20 minutes to refocus after a distraction. So, if you are checking your email every five minutes or your social media is sending you notifications, you are never going to get in the zone with what you are reading. An hour may go by with the text in front of you and your eyes may have even looked at every word, but you will not have read it!
2. Students should read on paper as much as possible rather than on a digital screen. Research has shown that reading on paper improves retention and the ability to break down and navigate long, difficult texts. It is also easier to read actively with a physical text. Reading actively involves annotating the text carefully--underlining and/or starring key passages, writing in the margins, inserting cross-references to previous parts of the text, identifying theses and sub-theses, inserting questions, etc. For this reason, DO NOT USE A HIGHLIGHTER. Just throw away your highlighters, and find a good pencil or pen.

It is also helpful to have a notepad handy to jot down thoughts and questions that occur to you and the page number or passage that motivated them.

3. I find that a lot of reading frustration actually comes from the feeling that a student has spent an hour with a text and has not retained anything. Then the student throws the book across the room and says, "I'm never going to be able to read and remember all of this!" The above practices should help with the memory part. Once students have figured out how to read effectively, then we can address the "amount" question.
4. One of the skills that students should learn in college is how to find what is most important in a reading, and thereby, identify what they can skim and what they need to read closely. One often finds oneself skimming whole paragraphs and then alighting upon a crucial sentence and rereading it a few times to internalize it. Reading a text should almost always involve a mix of skimming and close reading. I find that students usually are doing one or the other. They start out reading every word closely and then look at the clock and give up. Or they skim the whole thing and move on without having identified the main point.
5. To do this effectively, students should do a bit of pre-reading. This is to say, look through the text before you start reading it. Is it divided into chapters or sections? Do these give you any clues as to the structure of the argument, and what parts might be background or context and what parts give you the author's own contributions? Of course, this depends on the genre of the text,. It will work better for nonfiction than fiction. When reading fiction, it is usually about getting a sense of the whole, and then going back to attend to things like language, characterization, etc. So, students might do a quick read for plot, and then a second slower read, lingering on those episodes that seemed most crucial. Of course, if a student has chosen to take a course on, say, 19th century literature, they are just going to need to strap in, enter a cone of silence, and go back to steps one and two. Other ways to break down a non-fiction text before diving in might be to look at the index to see where certain key concepts might make an appearance, or if the text is electronic, to run a search for key terms (before printing it out, of course!). These will be further clues as to where the main action of the text might be happening, in light of the student's interest and the theme or requirements of the course.
6. Finally, I like to tell my students that a syllabus of readings is not like a course of antibiotics. You don't have to take every single pill for it to work. It is more like a buffet: Try a bit of everything and come back for more of what you like. As with each reading, so too for a syllabus, look ahead to see what authors or texts you want to be sure to read closely and which you might sample a bit and come back to later. Students might also ask the professor if there are any texts on the syllabus that they consider "anchor" texts for the course. These are the texts that

the student should prioritize. Nobody is ever going to read everything. So, don't get discouraged. You will still learn a lot, even if you don't finish every page of the reading. And you will have the syllabus, if you want to continue learning later, which is the whole point of education. But if you create the right conditions for reading, have the right tools, and exercise a little more intention in how you prepare for and approach a reading, you might read and retain more than you think you can. At the very least, you won't have just read the first twenty pages of every book and remember little but the authors' names.

Reading a Scientific Paper Effectively

Thank you to Notre Dame professor David Veselik of the Biology Department who recommended this online resource to help students learn how to effectively read a scientific article.

[How to Read A Scientific Paper](#)

This resource is provided by [Science Buddies](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to inspiring and educating students of all ages with hands-on STEM explorations.