

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

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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: Look “around” the text before you start reading.

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, and if so, how does his (or her) reputation or credentials influence your perception of what you are about to read? If unknown, has an editor helped to situate the writer (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 layout guide your reading?

* 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 from them, and from one another. Texts demand different things of you as you read, so whenever you can, register the type of information you’re presented with.

2. Annotating: “Dialogue” with yourself, the author, and the issues and ideas at stake.

From start to finish, make your reading of any text thinking-intensive.

* First of all: throw away the highlighter in favor of a pen or pencil. Highlighting can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. It only seems like an active reading strategy; in actual fact, it can lull you into a dangerous passivity.

* Mark up the margins of your text with WORDS: 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 REASON you are reading and 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 . . . Like your marginalia, your hieroglyphs can help you reconstruct the important observations that you made at an earlier time. And they will be indispensable when you return to a text later in the term, in search of a passage, an idea for a topic, or while preparing for an exam or project.

* Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions—“what does this mean?” “why is he or she drawing that conclusion?” “why is the class reading 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 further 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 weigh in on how effectively or how sloppily its argument has been made. Questions to ask:

* What is the writer asserting is true or valid (that is, what is he or she trying to convince me of? What am I being asked to believe or accept?

* Why should I accept the writer’s claim(s) as true or valid? Or, conversely, why should I reject the writer’s claim(s)?

* What reasons or evidence does the author supply me, and how effective is the evidence?

- * What is fact? And what is opinion?

- * Is there anywhere that the reasoning breaks down? Are there things that do not make sense?

4. Look for repetitions and patterns: These are often indications of what an author considers crucial and what he expects you to glean from his argument. The way language is chosen or used 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: After you've finished reading, put the reading in perspective.

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

- * Also view it 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: Fit this text into an ongoing dialogue

- * 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 or how has it affected your response to the issues and themes of the course?