

# Political Science Workshop: Critical Reading and Note-Taking

Spring 2015, Hunter College

John McMahon, Political Science WAC Fellow ([jmcmahon@gradcenter.cuny.edu](mailto:jmcmahon@gradcenter.cuny.edu))

Office hours: Monday 12:15-2pm / Tuesday 9:30-11am, HW 1730A

## QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU READ

- What kind of text are you reading? What genre is it in? What is the critical context? What is the intended audience? What is your purpose in reading?
- What kinds of notes or aids are most useful for you? What is the advantage of using different strategies – like highlighting/underlining, making a summary, marginal notes?
- What are you meant to get out of the text? Are you supposed to get the gist of it? Or to remember details? Are you supposed to close read the language of the text? Are you supposed to apply or relate the text to something else? Are you supposed to engage with (agree, disagree, tweak, nuance) the text? Depending on your answer, *how does that influence your reading speed?*

## READING AND NOTE-TAKING STRATEGIES

*Note: many of these can be used together!*

Annotation/Marginal notes: Forbid yourself from highlighting or underlining, but make yourself do marginal notations (in the book/on the print-out, on a separate paper, on a PDF document)

- Every time you feel the need to underline/highlight, write in the margin a note why wanted to do so: why is that passage important?
- Use marginal notes to: summarize; ask questions; agree or disagree

*Most effective at: interacting with reading, reading for meaning*

What it Says/What it Does: for each paragraph, or section, or sub-section, write a short (1 sentence or less) note of:

- What It Says: summary of content – stated or implied topic sentence
- What It Does: purpose or function within the reading as a whole
  - ‘provides evidence for claim’; ‘summarizes opposing view’; provides data to support argument’;
  - ‘uses analogy to clarify idea’; etc.

*Most effective at: promoting careful reading and awareness of structural function*

Graphic organization: represent the text visually

- Flowchart, concept maps, organizational diagram, sketches, drawings
- Offers a different perspective than other written forms

*Most effective at: reconstructing argument and main ideas*

Double entry (summary/response): after you write, write 2 short paragraphs

- 1. Represent the text in your own words: restate the argument
  - Can take alternate forms: flowchart, diagram, etc.
  - Understand the structure and argument as fully and concisely as possible
- 2. Respond to the text: personal reaction/reflection
  - Analyze it, relate to other readings or personal experience; question it; believe it; doubt it; refute it; go beyond it

*Most effective at: providing overview of argument and structure; promoting active reading; joining academic conversation*

Believing/doubting: as you read, make 2 kinds of notes in the margins, in a separate document, etc.

- Take on opposing views AND be an active part of the reading
- 1. Believing: read generously and empathetically by taking on author's perspective even if you disagree with it
  - assume the argument is correct and follow through their logic and rhetoric
- 2. Doubting: play devil's advocate for the text by raising objections, looking for weaknesses, asking critical questions of the author

*Most effective at: practicing double role as reader as open to and skeptical of texts*

Reverse outline: Take 5-10 minutes after you read to outline what you just read

- Think of text as hierarchical structure
- Organize complex material into parts with functions: presents a counter-argument, evidence to support a claim, maps out upcoming section, topic sentence
- Map statements together

*Most effective at: Understanding structure of an argument as well as the argument itself*

Freewrite argumentative response: in 5-10 minutes after you read, write out answers to the following questions

- 1. Before I read this text, the author assumed I knew and believed that \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. After I finished reading, the author wanted me to think and believe that \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. The author was OR was not successful in changing my view? How so? Why or why not?

*Most effective at: thinking through rhetorical context and argument; seeing that texts are designed to change views*

Write a summary: after doing a reading, write a one-paragraph summary

- Separate main ideas from details: read for meaning
- Requires listening carefully to the author
- Be precise, clear, and succinct

*Most effective at: providing overview of argument; finding structure of a reading*

### **NOTE-TAKING IN CLASS**

- Use some strategies above, either during class or outside of class!
- Try to take notes in a way that organizes and structures lectures and discussions
  - Differentiate from main arguments/ideas and supporting details
- Ask questions in your notes – questions about a lecture; questions of your classmates during a discussions
- Write one-paragraph summaries of the day's class that integrate lecture/discussion and highlight main ideas, arguments, and debates
- Find the medium that's best for you (notebook? On the readings themselves? Word document?)
  - Minimize distractions! Close other windows, airplane mode your phone, turn off wi-fi, etc.; consider apps like Anti-Social or Freedom

***Portions of this handout adapted from:***

- John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition
- Writing workshop by Briana Brickley, Writing Fellow, Hunter College English Department