

they have an empirical base to work with.

That means focusing on two things. First, written assignments have to serve a dual purpose. Not only do they have to show the student's mastery (or lack thereof) of the substantive material, they have to be designed so that students can compare two or three examples and begin to see how one or more of the key concepts in comparative politics helps make sense out of the variation encountered in class and in the readings.

Second, theory and concepts can play an extremely important role at the end of the course. At that point, the student can bring the concept or proposition "to life" by examining it in the light of the substantive material covered during the course. And, because the theoretical and generally applicable material comes near the end, it is what the student is most likely to retain in the months and years after the course ends, particularly those students who never take another comparative politics course again.

*Conclusion: On Seeing With New Eyes.* Marcel Proust once wrote, "[t]he real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes." Helping students "see with new

eyes" is the pedagogical challenge facing comparativists.

When I was an undergraduate in the late 1960s that was easier than it is now. The concepts comparativists had just developed "spoke" to the events unfolding in the world, especially in what we then called the "new nations" of the "developing world."

If the argument of this paper is correct, that connection between the "real" and "academic" worlds is less evident now when, given the way our students have evolved, the need for showing it to them is more important than ever. Again, if this argument is correct, it means we have to blend the issues we have experimented with plus others we have done less with (e.g. gender, political economy) into the traditional core of the subfield.

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## On Reading: Strategies for Students\*

Anthony Daley, Wesleyan University

**W**hy should you read an essay on reading? Good question. What do you do before you write? You surely know what you *must* do first. You must *think*. You sit down at your desk to write an essay. Why is it such an ordeal? You must think.

Let's step back a bit. Think about your attitudes toward reading. Do you like to read? What do you enjoy reading? Or not enjoy reading? Why do you have trouble reading certain materials, such as the readings for your comparative politics course? Why do you find

*National Inquirer* easier? Perhaps you need to look up words from that social science reading in a dictionary. Good. The only way to increase your vocabulary and avoid perpetual recourse to a dictionary is to find out what those difficult words mean.

Reading is fun for its own sake because it engages our imagination. It can be as racy and as compelling as we allow it. We read, however, for more than simple enjoyment.

In the university, we read to accumulate raw materials, to sharpen our analytical capabilities, and to

develop our expressive skills. The first reason entails borrowing information or data for an argument we might make later. The second encourages us to develop our own ideas, while the third helps us express our ideas more persuasively. Reading and writing empower us through active learning: the process of self-expression helps us forge connections among superficially disparate observations.

Before you sit down to write an essay, you need to know something about the subject. When students come to my office in search of pa-

per topics or a particular slant on a topic, I usually tell them to read such and such. How many of you have had that experience? You are totally confused about your final paper. It is the end of the semester, and you have three or four other courses to worry about. You talk to the professor, who suggests that you read five or six texts. Isn't that just what you wanted to hear? Occasionally, you can write an essay without any research. Most of the time you cannot. You have to read books, articles, or other materials on the subject.

Writing is an art. As with other arts, you need materials, preparation, technique, and thought to make the final product. Think of Michelangelo staring at the blank ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. What would he have done without paint, brushes, palette, and his other tools? The materials for your essay will consist mostly of the books and articles you read. (The materials for a longer research paper might consist of interviews, participant observation, etc.)

If the painter lacks paint or uses poor brushes, the painting will be flawed. Likewise, if you do not read, if you do not think about the issues that impinge on your thesis or argument, the final product will not read well. The critics will "pan" you. How would you write a paper on Congressional decision making without having read texts on the committee system, Congressional leadership, relations between Congress and the president, the role of staff members, the influence of lobbies, etc.? Could you write a persuasive essay off the top of your head about Russian foreign policy, African political systems, interest groups in the United States?

I once had a student who abused substances before a midterm. His essay was vague, unsupported, poorly conceived, and did not address the question. That will happen to you if you write without reading. You will receive an F, and the person reading your essay will think considerably less of you.

Let's think about social science. You believe the professor will give you a C in that comparative politics course if you do not get your act

together. Maybe you will fail that urban politics course. Why should you fail? You have a set of materials to read during a 13-week semester. You read those materials, and you must *think* critically about them. The professor tests your critical capacities in the midterm and final or in a few short papers.

How can you wade through those 2,000+ pages of books and articles assigned by the professor? At 300 words to a page, you will be reading 600,000 words. How can you pull an A? Of course, if you were interested in the subject matter of those 2,000 pages you might ask instead, "How can I discover more about this fascinating subject?"

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*As a better reader and writer, you will think more critically. And as a critical thinker, the world will make more sense to you.*

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When you read you must think. Is this so outrageous? Thinking differentiates you from other mammals. However, you need to *focus* your cerebral powers and concentrate.

One of the major problems I have when I start reading (and I assume we are in this all together) is distraction. When you are distracted, you read words, sentences, paragraphs. Yet, you retain little of what you "read." You may try to underline in the hope that, since you remembered nothing the first time, perhaps you will capture the main ideas for a later pre-exam review.

Most of you underline with pen, pencil, or "hi-liter." Why do you "hi-lite?" Aside from adding lovely color to the page, it does nothing for your reading. It is particularly insidious because it reinforces a natural passivity and encourages you to daydream. You should use pen or pencil when you read so that you can write comments in the margin and notes on paper.

Think about another consequence of aimless "hi-liting." If you are reading a library book, you are desecrating public property. And you deceive the next person who reads the text.

Random "hi-liting" looks like the suitcase of the student who buys a Eurorail pass for a one-month whirlwind tour of Europe and never gets off the train. He or she may bring home postcards from every train station in Western Europe, without actually seeing the sights depicted. In other words, underlining in whatever form should not be a way to show you have been there; it should be a reminder of what you have gleaned from the experience.

Most students need a strategy for reading academic prose. That strategy should correspond to the difficulty of the text. We can develop a number of strategies to read difficult texts. This may make the text more enjoyable. Or it may only make it more comprehensible. At the very least, it will help you wade through those thousands of words that confront you on a weekly basis. As a better reader, you will become a better writer. As a better reader and writer, you will think more critically. And as a critical thinker, the world will make more sense to you.

## Reading for an Argument

We will assume that the text in hand has some intrinsic merit. Someone has asked you to read it. Perhaps it will give you ideas for that essay you need to write. What do you do with it? If you find it as boring as the Home Shopping Network, you need a strategy to end the ordeal. Even if you find it interesting and full of insight, you will want to "consume" it efficiently. In either case, you need to discern what the author is saying. With those 2,000 pages to read in the course, four courses a semester, two semesters a year, four years of college, how do you keep track of all those words? That, of course, is the 64,000-word question.

You should know by now that those words add up to something

called an argument or hypothesis. The author at one time had to go through the same grueling process that you will go through when you write. At one time, the author developed a thesis, then a thesis statement, then sub-elements of that statement, then provided evidence for each sub-element, then related the argument to a body of literature, and, finally, demonstrated the importance of the endeavor. Whenever you read, remember the writing process. The major difference between your writing and the author's text is that yours is not published. (A few IQ points may also be involved, but you should not decide *a priori* that they belong to the author.)

When you read a text, use the argumentative techniques outlined above and work them backwards. You start with a finished product, and you reduce it to its thesis statement, noting the road between the two. Conceive of this reduction in terms of an argument with which you may be familiar. Ask your father if you can borrow the car to take your boy/girlfriend for a weekend in Ensenada. Do you record all the words exchanged? That may be a useful tactic for future discussions with Dad. Ordinarily, however, you will not remember all the words.

You could probably summarize the entire conversation as follows: "Dad, can I borrow the Impala during spring break? I would like to take Mary to Ensenada." "No." You have condensed that 30-minute discussion into 18 words. Not bad, but you could probably condense it further: "Please, Dad, the car?" "No." That is even better. You have reduced it to five words. If you can summarize like this, why would you want to "hi-lite" 200 pages of a 400-page book? Why take 15 pages of notes for a 10-page article?

When I was in college, I took a nationally marketed reading course. I found it useful, not because it enabled me to read the Webster's Unabridged in 45 minutes over dinner, but because it taught me to summarize. The aim of such a course is active reading. You read with your hands, catching key words, key phrases. You learn to concentrate

on the text. You learn, through diagrams, to follow an argument. At various junctures, you summarize the main point. In a nutshell, active reading forces you to squeeze the essence out of the text.

### The Active Reading Process

If you are to be an active reader, you need to concentrate in a comfortable environment. There is no one proper reading environment for everyone. You might be comfortable in a carrel on the fifth floor of the library stacks or at a table at an outdoor café. You might work better in your dorm room with Earth, Wind & Fire blaring on the stereo. You need to find an environment appropriate to the tasks in front of you. I can easily read *Newsweek* sitting in a large overstuffed chair, but I must sit at a desk when I read Marx.

After you have found a comfortable environment, you should not go to sleep, sip a martini, or alter your consciousness in any form. Thumb through the text and read the chapter titles or subheadings or whatever the author has used to divide the text. This action is like skimming a newspaper at 10:00 a.m. as you rush off to that 10:10 class. You read: "NUCLEAR WAR: RUSSIANS BOMB CLEVELAND," "FIRE FIGHTERS THREE HOURS IN TREE TO FETCH 18-YEAR-OLD ANTI-WAR ACTIVIST," "RED SOX LOSE CLIFF-HANGER TO A'S 19-0." These headlines, as the author's divisions within the text, give you an idea of what will follow.

In a text, you read the headings, subheadings, or chapter titles to get a rough idea about the themes. The next part is a bit trickier. Read the first page of the text. What is the author trying to tell you? Can you summarize that page in one sentence? Try it. Perhaps you cannot answer that question in one paragraph after reading only one page. Read five or ten pages (more if the text is long, less if it is short.) Try to bring your initial impressions into focus. Can you answer the following questions?

- On what is the author focusing? What is he or she trying to explain?
- How does the author tell the "story"?
- What body of literature or existing belief does the author attack, and on what grounds?
- What hypotheses (arguments) are generated?
- What is the most important evidence substantiating the main argument?
- What subarguments contribute to the overall argument?

Write a short paragraph in which you answer these questions, one by one. Are you still having problems with your summary? Perhaps you missed something in your first reading. Reread those first few pages quickly. Can you now answer those questions? Perhaps the author has written a long introduction, and the answers to those questions are located further on. Finish the chapter or article, keeping these questions in mind. Underline only those passages that help you answer those questions. If you do not like to underline, take quick notes that refer to both the passage and the page number. Now write that paragraph again. Reread it to yourself. Have you answered these questions? If not, don't panic. Go back through the text to answer them. Do not be afraid to reread the text. (If the author had to write multiple drafts to get the argument straight, should you be expected to pick everything up on the first reading?)

You can adapt this technique to particular texts. Let us take a book with nine chapters as an example. Chapter one may be straightforward, attempting to explain the problems with the literature and how the author's research will remedy them. You will probably be able to write a quick summary attempting to answer as many of the above questions as you can from these first few pages.

Chapter two may pose more problems. The author may enter into a detailed analysis of the manner in which other scholars have approached the phenomena under investigation. How do you summarize all that information? You



should first ask yourself if you need to know the details of these individual analyses in order to understand this particular text. You will probably only want to note quickly that other scholars focus on X or on Y; the author of the text you are reading focuses on Z.

In a book with several chapters, you will ordinarily find the major thesis, the overall argument, in the second or third chapter. Here you should pay close attention. In the social sciences, an argument ordinarily assumes the form of a propositional *hypothesis*. This is a statement that posits a specific relation between two or more actants (also called variables.) It is ordinarily derived from a *theory*, which is a set of interrelated propositional hypotheses about a particular subject. The hypothetical statement is also conjectural. It is stated in such a manner that it can be verified or falsified. Thus, the relation between actants can be *tested* with evidence.

If the hypothesis is verified, then one element of the theory from which the hypothesis was derived is also verified. If it is falsified, then the theory needs to be changed. Let us consider an example of a hypothesis: “the use of this essay increases good grade achievement.” We find here a relation between two actants, “use of essay” and “good grade achievement.” We can test this hypothesis by measuring “use” (and “non-use”) and “grades.” We also know that our specific hypothesis is deduced from a larger theory of pedagogy.

You will need to read carefully the chapter or section of the book in which the author states the major hypothesis. In your on-going summary, you should note this hypothesis. You may want to write it in the author’s words if it is explicitly stated. If the author leaves it implicit, or does not clearly state, “This is my hypothesis,” you will need to derive it yourself. You should ask yourself:

- What are the actants, the variables?
- How do they relate to one another?
- What causes what?

The author may present a complex argument. You will need to ask yourself:

- Which actant explains another actant which, in turn, explains another actant?

If you cannot answer these questions on first reading, reread the relevant section of the text. Once you determine *what* the author is attempting to explain, you will find the remainder of the text much easier.

Ordinarily, after the initial courtship of reader with interest and hypotheses, the author lays out in the following chapters: (1) the minor hypotheses that build up to the major one already stated; (2) how the relations between variables can and will be tested; and (3) the actual results of the tests that the author made in his or her research, otherwise known as the “evidence.” This third phase may consist of several chapters depending on the complexity of the argument. The author has structured the presentation of the research into chapters. You should summarize each chapter in your own words, answering the questions we have already posed.

In the final chapter, the author usually presents the conclusion. In other words, the author reassembles the findings of the research. This process may involve relating all the subarguments (subhypotheses) to the major argument. It may point to the need for future scholarly work on this subject. The conclusion may refer to a larger social phenomenon that can be explained with the hypotheses verified in the research. It may simply consist of a restatement of the findings. As you read the conclusion, you should sharpen your critical knives and cut into these findings:

- (1) Do they make sense?
- (2) Has the author assessed his or her own data?
- (3) Can you find logical inadequacies in the construction of the overall argument?
- (4) From what you have read of the literature that the author has attacked, do you find the

author’s criticisms and revisions justified?

- (5) Are the findings important? Has the author simply made a mundane argument that we already knew? Or explained the obvious? Or has the author proven an argument that can be considered controversial?
- (6) How do these controversial findings, if any, relate to your own previous conception of the phenomenon?
- (7) Can you apply these controversial findings to other social relations? In other words, your reading of the author’s conclusion should force you, the reader, to make your own conclusions.

You have now read all the chapters. You should have nine paragraphs of summaries for your nine-chapter book. What do you do with all this writing? Reread it. Does your interpretation make sense? Will you understand your summaries five weeks from now? If you find inconsistencies or vague formulations in your own thoughts, reread the relevant passage in the text and make your interpretation more understandable. Perhaps you will discover after having read the conclusion that you totally misrepresented one part of the subargument. Go back and correct it.

After finishing your nine paragraphs, you will feel a real sense of accomplishment. You will want to rest those brain cells. Don’t stop! You must write one more paragraph. Summarize your summaries. This may seem senseless; it may seem tedious. It is tedious, but it is not senseless. Your one-paragraph summary will pull together the text for you. If you can briefly answer the following questions,

- What is the major argument?
- In general terms, what constituted the evidence?
- Is the research convincing?
- How and why does it succeed or fail?

you have successfully dissected the text. You have also focused that text in your own mind. You can now put your one-paragraph summary in front of your nine other

paragraphs, file it away, and take a break.

I have described in loose terms the process of reading a nine-chapter book. From all the reading you have done in your school career, you should know that authors use different structures to present their work. Perhaps the major hypothesis will be boldly stated in the first chapter, or the author will wait until the second or third chapter to state the argument. Perhaps the literature review will precede the statement of major argument or the review will follow the argument. You should also know that scholarly articles are narrow in focus and tightly written.

I cannot give you a precise formula for reading the different texts that you will encounter. Instead, I have suggested a technique that consists of periodic reading and summarizing. You may choose to read by subchapters rather than by chapters. You may decide to ignore the author's divisions of the text and make your own starting and stopping points. The essential part of this technique consists of your summaries in your own words. You need to be constantly *involved* in the text, and you need to read critically.

### Improving Comprehension

Do you notice something familiar about this process? You are thinking as you read. You are active. You are critical. You pick apart the text. Aren't you asking the same questions you ask yourself when you write an essay? Writing is not that different from reading. I would even argue that reading is not necessarily easier than writing; they are mirror images of one another. If you want to read critically, you will need to know the basic process of writing and argumentation. If you want to write well, you will need to read effectively.

You could justifiably argue that this process of active reading is admirable if the reader understands the text. What do you do if the prose is dense, if the text is not well written, if so much information is presented that the reader

feels swamped, if the concepts and categories are unfamiliar and difficult to comprehend? Unfortunately, most of the published material you will read will be poorly written. Even more unfortunately, social science writing tends to fall disproportionately into the category of bad writing. It is frequently poorly organized, conceptually convoluted, grammatically clumsy, and replete with seemingly unnecessary facts and figures. Nonetheless, you will need to make sense out of these texts. You will need to complement the active reading process with a basic method for improving reading comprehension.

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*You need to be constantly involved in the text, and you need to read critically.*

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When you encounter difficult prose, you should start by picking apart each sentence individually. You start with the basics: subject, verb, object. Where is the subject of the sentence? What is the subject doing? Is it changing, determining, killing, understanding, deterring, or combating something? Let us look at an example of dense prose that I found difficult on first reading:

Abstract rational discussion conceals the concrete irrational dynamics of social phenomena whose epiphenomenal character must still be understood in terms of that prehistory which remains under the spell of the unfolding of the commodity form.

Can you identify the subject, verb, and object? Your answer should be "discussion," "conceals," "dynamics."

You still need to take this sentence breakdown one step further. Is there anything interesting or unique about the fact that "discussion conceals dynamics?" Read as a simple sentence, it appears ridiculous. How can discussion conceal dynamics? Let us look at the modifiers. The discussion is not simply a discussion but an abstract and ra-

tional discussion. Dynamics are concrete and irrational. Dynamics do not exist in thin air. These dynamics are the object of a particular phrase: of social phenomena. We have found the primary clause of the sentence: abstract rational discussion conceals the concrete irrational dynamics of social phenomena.

Think about this sentence. What is it telling you? A certain kind of discussion conceals a certain kind of dynamic of social phenomenon. The author counterposes abstract and rational discussion to concrete and irrational dynamics of social phenomena. We might conclude that concrete and irrational discussion would not conceal concrete irrational dynamics of social phenomena. Let us not carry the logic too far before we dissect the entire sentence. That social phenomena has a particular character, epiphenomenal, that should be understood in a particular manner. The epiphenomenal character of social phenomena should be understood in terms of something, in terms of that prehistory which remains under the spell of something. The character of that phenomena remains under the spell of the unfolding of the commodity form.

We have now dissected this rather dense sentence. Do you understand it better? You may still have problems because you do not understand certain concepts such as *prehistory* and *commodity form*. If you have not studied a certain theoretical tradition, you may have problems. Your first step should always go in the direction of a dictionary. As mentioned earlier, and it is worth repeating, you can only build your vocabulary by learning the meanings of unfamiliar words.

However, the dictionary may not always suffice to explain social science concepts. Standard dictionaries have been written for general audiences, and the definitions you will find may not always be as complete as you would prefer. If the dictionary is insufficient, you might ask a friend, someone you think might be familiar with a certain theoretical language. You might ask your teaching assistant, instructor, or professor about the

meaning and background of a certain concept. You might go to the library and look under the subject catalogue for basic books that explain the concepts of a particular theoretical school.

Let's return to the sentence. Assume that you have figured out the meaning of the specialized terms. By *prehistory*, we mean the historical antecedents of a given occurrence. *Commodity form* refers to the process of "commodification" by which humans (and their labor) are treated like commodities, i.e., bought and sold in the marketplace. What remains of our sentence? First, it remains dense and difficult to read. Second, and perhaps more important for our purposes since we need comprehension, we can reduce its meaning to the following:

Certain forms of discussion have an implied rationality, but they are so abstract that they conceal certain social dynamics. These dynamics may, in turn, have side effects which also must be understood. How? We can understand them in terms of earlier events that were affected by market relations.

This is not as precise as the original sentence, but it may make more sense.

You should resist the temptation to shrug your shoulders and dismiss certain concepts as mere jargon. You, as a writer, want your language to be taken seriously, and, as a reader, you should read seriously the language of the text in front of you. After all, what is jargon? It is simply the use of words with very specific meanings to define in precise terms certain phenomena. The goal of every social scientist should be precision, and jargon facilitates that scientific precision.

Concepts should be explained only if confusion exists about their meaning. (For instance, little disagreement in the economics literature exists over what constitutes a demand curve.) Jargon exists to make language more concise. Problems arise when writers lose control of their language. You, as a critical reader, should be vigilant about this problem. (As I have hinted already, published work may be no better than your own.) You

should think about the concepts you encounter while reading and accept or reject them on their own merits.

Therefore, you should be vigilant about the use and abuse of jargon. Heavy use of jargon sometimes masks fuzzy thinking or trivial ideas. When both reading and writing, you need to think through how ideas can be expressed in simpler language. Equally important, you need to think through the assumptions embedded in prose—yours or another author's. Within what intellectual paradigm is the author working? What are the world views at work?

Not all social scientists view the world similarly. Therefore, we should expect that the language they use will differ as well. Writers of different theoretical traditions or with different theoretical orientations may use different concepts to explain similar phenomena. (Likewise, where one author sees a problem, another may not.) Writers of the pluralist tradition, for instance, will try to explain political behavior in the United States by pointing to individuals and organizations jockeying for influence within the centers of political power—the presidency, the Congress, the bureaucracy. Pluralists hold few *a priori* assumptions about the power of each political actor. A Marxist would explain political behavior by analyzing the struggle between social classes. These different conceptualizations will, of course, lead to different conclusions. Which is the "better" approach? Only you, the reader, can decide. As you approach a text, however, you must realize that "reality" only exists by the way we conceptualize it.

Once again we need to think through approaches to writing. My students always claim that an objective reality exists. Facts exist "out there" in the real world. The logical conclusion to such reasoning is simple: good, clear writing is unnecessary.

Let us look at this problem from the reader's point of view. How do you deal with different interpretations of similar phenomena? Try the following informative experi-

ment sometime. Pick a controversial issue that is currently in the news. Buy as many newspapers as you can find of all political orientations, from the most "reactionary" to the most "radical." Think about the manner in which the same issue is conceptualized in these different papers. What are the "facts?" Which concepts are useful? We can use the abortion (reproductive choice) issue as a concrete example. Is the right to have an abortion "murder" or is it "free choice?"

As you can see, the way we conceptualize a problem has enormous implications. It points even to the language we use to discuss it—the abortion or the reproductive choice debate? How would you conceptualize the war in Vietnam? You could conceptualize it as a civil war, as a war of national liberation, as a war to contain communist expansion, as an imperialist war, as a mistaken war. These conceptualizations are not mutually exclusive, but each carries implications that we should recognize.

We have debunked "reality." How do you approach different, unfamiliar conceptualizations? How do you cope with unfamiliar languages or discourses? You read slowly. You pick apart sentences as I suggested above. You follow the active reading approach. You will have to take more extensive notes than usual. You will need to underline (with a pen or pencil and not with a "hi-liter"), perhaps circling unknown concepts for future clarification. You may write in the margins. After reading five pages of this difficult text, do you understand the author? If not, go back over the text and identify what you find difficult. Think it out: this concept is used here to describe this phenomenon—X leads to Y which leads to Z. The author is making a Z argument.

Heavily theoretical writing is usually difficult to read and understand on the first reading. You need to prepare yourself accordingly. You may also have problems reading heavily empirical writing. Is every number and statistic, datum and place important? Do you need to remember those graphs and charts? Again, I can give you no



simple answers. However, if you use the active reading method, you will look for arguments, hypotheses, evidence.

Is it really important to know that the German Christian Democratic Union has 726,451 members? It may be important for certain purposes, but if you are reading an article on mass political parties in Europe, you might simply note that the CDU has 3/4 million members. If you are reading an article on industrialization in the United States, do you need to note production figures for coal, iron, and brassieres in 1897? Do you need to know the names of Chester Arthur's cabinet or the cause of Catherine the Great's fall from grace? You use your common sense but only within the active reading method.

You will find that noting unknown facts will be extremely tempting. Resist that temptation. Note what is important. That importance will be determined by the character of the hypotheses and the overall argument. Your task as reader as well as your task as writer consists of understanding social phenomena. It does not consist of compiling senseless lists of names, dates, facts, and figures.

## Critical Reading

I asked you earlier to think about your attitudes toward reading. How often do you find yourself daydreaming while reading? How often do you finish reading a text with no opinion about it? How often do you forget the sense of the preceding paragraph? We, as readers, are probably naturally inclined toward passivity. After all, serious thought requires effort.

A text is not like a TV. You can make an effort to entertain yourself with a text, but a text cannot inherently entertain you. If you exert yourself, if you are an active reader, you will insert yourself and your critical capacities into the text. You will be a critical reader.

As you know from your own experiences, putting pen to paper is no easy act. To dismiss immediately someone's writing is an act of

aggression. Or you could call it bigotry. Isn't such an act similar to dismissing a person of another color, religion, or sex? You are rejecting without cause someone's ideas. However, you need not accept the argument at hand. Whenever you read, you should ask yourself: "Does this argument make sense?" "Is it logical?" "Is it important?"

A critical reader is a skeptical reader. You need to be convinced. If your task as a writer is to build carefully an argument, your task as a reader is to poke holes. You can think of yourself as the coach who forces the runner to run faster. You compliment the writer by criticizing the text. You push the writer to faster laps, newer heights, to a better understanding of social phenomena. In the process of pushing that author to a better understanding of social phenomena, you arrive at new heights. The more you use these critical skills, the sharper they will become.

These critical skills are essential to your own writing and argumentation. As you construct your argument, you should be your worst critic. As both reader and writer, you need to think, to exert the effort, to use those critical skills.

How do you develop such skills? You can teach yourself by constant critical reading. You will accept some methods of investigation and reject others. You will accept some perceptions of social phenomena and reject others. That which you accept will in some form be absorbed, internalized, osmosed. Remember that knowledge is not an ever-growing chest of "facts" that you keep in the back of your closet. Knowledge is the power of thought, the power of analysis, your critical capacities.

You will usually find social contact fruitful as well. Reading and listening are very similar activities. Listen to lectures. Attend discussion sections. Listen to the arguments made by your friends and colleagues. You may want to jot down notes quickly or at least make mental notes so that you can remember the chain of argument. Listen to the way an argument is constructed. Pose your objections.

Accept those elements you find convincing. Ask questions, both to inform yourself and to push the speaker further. A good listener is not a wall. A good listener, like a good reader, often provides useful feedback and can carry the discussion to a better understanding.

Constant exposure to analysis, from critical reading and critical listening, will rub off on you. I share with Susan Horton (1982) the belief that the writing process will sharpen your critical skills. Writing forces you to make decisions. Writing forces you to choose between conflicting interpretations. Your most important tool will be your openness. A good critic is open to new ideas, to new ways of viewing the world. Recall some events from your study of world history to remind yourself of the consequences of the failure to think critically. Think of the historical consequences of "closed minds." However, openness should not transform you into a sieve. That openness should always be tempered by your skepticism.

As you master the skills of analysis, as you become a more critical listener, reader, and writer, you will gain a better understanding of *audience* and *controversy*. These two concepts are critical to the writing process. Whenever you read a text, think about the audience that the author had in mind when he or she wrote. At a very simple level, you know that a political scientist does not write for a nuclear physicist. At a more sophisticated level, you will recognize that very intense controversies exist over the manner in which we view social phenomena.

Let us look at some of the literature in political science. Is the world becoming more "interdependent?" First, read Waltz (1979); then read Keohane and Nye (1977). Do peasants perceive their economic environment in terms of costs and benefits as would a twentieth century businessperson? Read Popkin (1979); then read Scott (1976). Are American political institutions controlled by a tight-knit ruling elite, or is there considerable access to the levers of power? Read Mills (1956); then read Polsky

(1963). We could list examples *ad infinitum*.

What should we derive from the existence of debates over how to view the world? First, controversy rests at the very heart of social science. While we may find agreement that single ballot/single constituency electoral systems encourage two-party political systems, little agreement exists about the character of those two parties. Will they both be moderate or will they be at different poles? How and when will those political parties change? You will find a number of areas of broad agreement in the social sciences, but you will probably find as many areas of disagreement. Controversy derives from critical thinking.

Second, these debates set the framework for the writer's conception of the audience. As a critical thinker, you want your analysis to be original. Your original analysis will always be framed by the character of the debate over your subject area. Whether you like it or not, you are profoundly influenced by the words, sentences, paragraphs, and arguments you hear and read. While your audience may be "out there somewhere," however, it is also you. You are the interpreter of the state-of-the-art debate. Your audience consists of those people who have thought about your subject area, but you must interpret their interpretations. You define your audience by the manner in which you define the literature. At a very fundamental level, you become your best audience. (Please note that this conception of audience should not induce slackness or laziness. On the contrary, your critical skill will be essential to interpret interpretations.)

Third, these debates prove that no grand truths exist for the analysis of social phenomena. While this may seem self-evident, most of us have trouble accepting it. How many of us have been gripped by a particularly convincing argument without challenging it? One need only look at the character of the discourse during political elections: "vote for candidate X because he is warm, fatherly, trustworthy." Faith may be appropriate to certain areas of our existence, but it will

not suffice for the social sciences. As soon as you accept an argument on faith, you surrender those critical skills you have been so carefully developing. The critics will pan you. You also become extremely boring. I recommend against adding faith to your analytical tool chest.

I would like to emphasize that critical reading does not imply out-

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*. . . critical reading does not imply outright rejection. We need to do more than poke holes in arguments. We read in order to build various visions of the world.*

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right rejection. We need to do more than poke holes in arguments. We read in order to build various visions of the world. We read to construct. In the process of reading, we need to sort out that which is valuable, looking for ways to improve the argument or relate it to other ideas. In other words, even in the strongest case of encountering a text that you find extraordinarily biased, empirically incorrect, or methodologically flawed, resist the temptation to recycle the pages. Instead, work through the argument's inadequacies and view it as a learning experience.

### Other Types of Prose

I have described above an approach to reading an argumentative essay. You will encounter other types of prose: explanation, description, and narration. Strictly speaking, they do not belong in the social sciences. Scientific analysis usually assumes the form of the argument. We develop theories of the world, derive hypotheses from these theories, and test these hypotheses with evidence. The way such a procedure is followed will,

of course, vary from author to author.

Social scientists will also differ in the manner in which they present their methodology. You will not always find texts in which the author writes: "this is my theory, X." However, the essence of social science is a theoretical understanding of social phenomena. The task of social scientists is to simplify complex social phenomena. A good theory explains much and is simple. A theory that only explains a tile on the floor is not as useful as the theory that explains the building.

What do you do when you encounter explanation, description, and narration? Let us look at each form.

*Explanation.* You could argue that explanation, making something clear, or comprehensible, is a form of social science prose. When explanation is found in social science writing, you need to determine if the author's explanation derives from a particular theory about social relations. Has the author developed hypotheses that can be tested?

Explanatory writing can be found in all areas of reading: the directions on your baseball bat; the blurb about Louis XIV in your guidebook of Paris; the talk given by your local neighborhood law-board cram-school director. How do you cope with such prose? It will not help to dismiss it completely because it is non-social science. You will have eliminated most of the world's prose from your purview, making you a far less interesting person. Instead, take what is useful. If you want to know how to swing a baseball bat, read the instructions. Then plug this information into your conception of the world.

You can take another approach to explanations that are not explicitly based on social science theories: try to discover a theory behind them. Try reading congressional testimony sometime. Can you discern theories of the world from it?

Let us take testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. Senate that discusses American policy toward the military



build-up of Liechtenstein. Can you discover the strategic orientations of American defense policy? How do the speakers view the American role in the world? How do they present our European defense policy? How do they conceptualize the role of military forces in diplomatic bargaining? Can you find a theory of international bargaining? Can you find a theory of interstate relations?

I cannot guarantee that you will be able to derive coherent theories. The testimony of a given speaker may be contradictory. However, whenever we speak, whenever we write, we theorize. Our language embodies a theory of the world. You should always attempt to disentangle such discourse. What is the author's conception? You, as a social scientist, can use nonscientific explanations to improve your scientific understanding of the world around you.

*Description.* What do you do when you encounter page after page of description? Use the tips from the previous sections: take what is useful and plug it into your own conception of the world. This strategy might work for lengthy descriptions of the Napoleonic armies or biographies of Coolidge administration cabinet secretaries.

You should always ask yourself why the author is writing such description. Is it intended only for information? Can you find a message that the author is trying to convey? Perhaps the organization of the Napoleonic armies serves as an example of the organizational problems of charismatic leadership. Thus, you may be able to trace out theories of organization. A biography of a cabinet secretary may emphasize that the individual lived and worked within a certain social circle. This information may lead you to think about the role of social class in American politics.

You will discover that writers of descriptive prose always have ulterior motives. Why does the writer decide to tell you one aspect and not another? You should think about what might constitute the missing elements. The author does not simply present a list of facts to

the reader; the facts have been deliberately organized. The choice of an organizing principle can reveal the prejudices of the author. For example, how many different ways can you describe a Soviet-American summit conference in 1972?

Picking out organizing principles is not always easy. Sometimes the author will offer convenient subheadings. Most of the time, such headings will not help dissect the prose. Step back from the prose and use some of the critical skills we discussed earlier. Can you find the major themes? Does the author seem to concentrate on particular activities?

For instance, in our example of the summit conference, does the author concentrate on the eccentricities of the leaders, or on military situations, on diplomatic bargaining, on economic relations? The emphases of the author will depend not only on the events of the conference but on the perceptions of the author. Should we expect Soviet and American journalists to have written the same article? It would be unlikely. Yet, both groups would describe the events as they saw them. You need to be conscious of the themes developed by the author. These themes may not constitute an argument as we have defined it here; however, they enable the author to group together unassembled facts, permitting the reader to make sense of them.

*Narration.* You will probably read more narrative prose in your lifetime than any other prose. You will only read a small percentage of it, however, in its longer form for your social science courses. Narration consists of storytelling, relating actual or fictional events. Most narrative prose you encounter is history and fiction, a prose form that I highly recommend if you aspire to be more than a colorless and boring social scientist. Some social scientists use narration extensively in anthropologically based social science work, such as that of Elliott Liebow. Of course, you will almost always find some stories and anecdotes in the midst of your social science, argumentative prose.

You can approach narration as you would explanation and description, but be careful. Pick out what is useful and plug it into your own theories, look for submerged theoretical arguments, look for themes. You also need to be extremely aware of the author's intentions. Why is the author telling the story? What does the author seem to want the reader to understand?

However, when reading the text, how do you know which historical trend is important? Which events are relevant? Do you have to know the entire sequence of events that caused Charles I to lose his head?

Narration can be persuasive, but it is much less consciously argumentative than social science prose. Unlike argumentative prose, neither description nor narration confront the reader with an explicit thesis. You must dig more deeply into the prose.

Your first task when reading narration should be obvious: you determine the story. Therefore, you must separate the important from the unimportant events. This is not as easy as it sounds. When reading narration, most people concentrate on nothing or everything; either they dismiss the story as having little value, or they note every little "fact" they read. I recommend neither strategy. You can take the author's purpose seriously without drowning in a sea of personalities, places, and events.

As with the active reading method described earlier, follow a simple note-taking strategy. When you reconstruct the story for your notes, first summarize the subject in one sentence; for example, the author tells "the story of the American revolution." You can take this first step even if you have only read the title or the publisher's blurb on the back of the book.

Next, summarize the story in one paragraph. This forces you to choose what is important. Then, step back from the prose and use some of the reading strategies discussed earlier. What themes can you find? Would someone else tell the story in the same manner? Would a Soviet or American historian or Nazi sympathizer tell the

story of World War II in the same way?

As you can see, narration, like argumentation, implies a position. Since stories can be told in an infinite number of ways, you must determine what motive the author has in telling it in a particular manner. You should always read the language: does it seem appropriate for the story, or is it too simple or complex? Is the language “loaded?” For instance, does the author refer frequently to Napoleon as the “Corsican renegade?” If the story is narrated in chronological order, are certain events condensed or enlarged? Does the author concentrate on particular themes? Can you think of other themes that could be embedded in the same story? Does the author show any indication of affect? For instance, could you imagine liking the personality that the author obviously disdains? If the author seems satisfied with a particular historical event, could you assume the opposite position? As you read the text, can you find contradictions? For instance, the author may write about class divisions in the Gilded Age, show sympathy for the dispossessed, and revel in the exploits of the railroad barons.

Can you uncover fallacies in the presentation of the story? A particularly common fallacy among historians is *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: if B happened after A, it must have been caused by A. “Because Richard Nixon was discovered to have been involved in the Watergate scandal after the historical trip to Peking and his arms control treaty with the Soviet Union, we can conclude that cooperation with communist regimes led him to criminal behavior.” Would you agree with that statement? If you have carefully read this essay, you toss that statement into the garbage can of history and question the intelligence of the text in general. What do all these questions tell you about the text? They indicate the author’s point of view.

You can also think about these questions by recalling what your high school English teacher told you to focus on when reading fiction: plot, character, setting,

theme, and tone. As you interpret a narrative text, you find the ostensibly objective elements—plot, character, setting. Your analysis of theme and tone will demonstrate how subjective those “objective” elements can be.

In reading narration, you must interpret the text, pick apart the language, and discern the themes and tones in order to frame the plot, characters, and setting. Just as the narrative author interprets the world around him or her, you need to interpret the interpretation. Your interpretation carries you to a higher level than the mere events. Remember, reality only exists in the way we see it. You make sense out of the text.

Most importantly, for all types of reading, you should follow the active reading method for argumentative prose described earlier. You should always be the critical reader. Your critical skills will enable you to transcend that morass of seemingly unconnected detail. Your critical skills will enable you to read more than a simple “story.” That added exertion, those questions you pose to the text will open up new vistas of comprehension. When you reconstruct the argument, explanation, description, story in your own words in the notes you take, you involve and insert yourself into the text. The analysis you bring to the text will make the world a little more understandable.

### Instrumental Reading

The rigor of an academic schedule forces us to make decisions about our reading. We will not always want or be able to squeeze every last drop out of the text in front of us. At times, you will want to think instrumentally about your reading.

You are familiar with much of what follows. My goal here is to force you to formalize, and therefore make more efficient, what you already do informally. You already use different reading strategies for different situations. Still, I can suggest ways to shorten your time with a given text.

First, you should always ask yourself why you are reading a text. The key to instrumental reading is the ability to gauge your situation. Is the text background material, or central to a body of literature that you wish to address? Perhaps it is exploratory reading in your search of a slant for an essay. Perhaps you will only be held responsible for one part of the narration. Perhaps it is the professor’s text in which case you may already have heard the argument in lecture. Your assessment of your reading situation will enable you to prioritize the tasks in front of you.

Second, you may want to determine the time you can devote to the text. Do you have an entire evening to read those five articles? Can you read those texts at your leisure or must you “consume” them in a couple of hours or less than one hour? Try assigning a time limit to each text. This procedure may sound like putting the cart before the horse, and in a certain sense it is. All things being equal, the nature of a text should determine your treatment of it. Unfortunately, all things are not equal. How many times have you spent a lengthy period of time with one text only to discover that you did not have enough time to read others that may have been equally worthy? If you try to budget your time, you can avoid such potential catastrophes.

You have determined your situation and the time allocation. Now, as a third step, you should try to determine in rough terms what the text contains. You may want to read the blurb on the back of the book, skim through the table of contents, look at the footnotes. I strongly recommend reading footnotes in any case, but if you read them when you start a text, you can frequently discover the intellectual tradition of the text. This will be useful for background reading or search reading for your essay.

Fourth, now that you have a rough idea about the text, you should rethink how it fits into your situation. Think about the entirety of the course readings. How does this one text connect to the others? Why do you think the professor

assigned the text? Has the professor emphasized this material in lecture? How does this text fit into the essay you are about to write? In essence, I am asking you to use those critical skills discussed earlier for your entire reading situation and not simply for the text.

If you have a number of texts to read, you might try hierarchizing their importance to the task at hand. Which text offers the most fruitful arguments for that midterm next week? What kind of questions do you think you will see? On such a quick look at the text, you might not be able to pigeonhole it. If you cannot, you will have to read it more carefully. You might also want to adjust the time you devote to it. If you can, you might want to follow the strategy below.

If you have followed the active reading method at all, you will have discovered that it actually shortens the time you ordinarily spend with a text. You attempt to nail down the argument; you look for major hypotheses, for evidence. You ask yourself if it all makes sense. You put it all into your own words. You concentrate on the text, and you block out other distractions. You do not get bogged down in details. When you read instrumentally, you speed up the process. You move quickly through the text to find the argument(s). You might read only the theoretical chapter(s). You might only read the literature review. Now that you are familiar with the organization of a social science essay, you can pick and choose throughout the text. What is it that you most need out of this text?

To read instrumentally, you will want to use some variant of skimming. Skimming is nothing more than fast reading in a systematic fashion. The essential element of skimming is reading in units. Look for the buzz words. Pick out the action within the text. Let your eyes comb the page. Instead of reading every word individually, read groups of words, first two-word, then three-word, then four-word groups. Try to lengthen the group as much as possible. Use your fingers on the page to facilitate your eye movements. Push

yourself to proceed as rapidly as possible.

While you comb the text, however, think to yourself what is going on with those dancing words. Read a short passage, then stop and quickly summarize what you have read. Do not feel frustrated at not catching everything. Read another passage. Quickly summarize it. Finish the text in this manner.

When you skim, you will not be able, by definition, to dissect the text completely. You look for those sections, that argument, that story that you need for the task at hand. That which you need you will want to read more carefully. You may decide that the text is not useful for the moment, so you will go to another text. You might discover later that you will have to reread that first text two years down the road. So what? Rereading a text two, seven, twenty-seven times will not kill you. A professor may reread the text every time he or she teaches it! However, in general you will want to mix skimming with close readings.

I should warn you that instrumental reading can have serious drawbacks. You might miss something as you skim several sections of a text. You might misread your reading situation, wrongly prioritize your readings, think a text unimportant, and find yourself confronted with a midterm question that necessitates a critical reading of that subargument you skipped.

The sinking feeling in one's stomach from having nothing intelligent to write can perhaps be rivalled by the experience of spending a week reading for an essay only to realize that you read in the wrong direction. However, active reader that you have now become, you should know how to remedy such problems before they "consume" you. You think. You question. You become again the critical reader.

As you can imagine, a fine line exists between instrumental reading and "inactive" or "uncritical" reading. Nonetheless, you always make choices within your reading situation. When you have too little time for too much reading, you do not treat all texts equally. You

need an organizing principle for your reading situation. If you reflect on the manner in which you make those choices, if you think systematically about your reading situation, if you develop reading strategies, you will find yourself in a better position to make judicial decisions to avoid future catastrophes.

## Conclusion

Why do you read? Is that such an absurd question? At a very basic level, you read to make the world more intelligible. What you read can help you make sense out of seemingly senseless phenomena. As a human being, you refuse to take your natural or social environment for granted. You are inquisitive. You doubt. You want to know the unknown. You accept little on faith. When you read, as when you listen, you can learn from other people who contemplate and analyze emotions, sensations, human interactions. You can learn to view the world differently. The world can become more understandable.

Since few of us are perfect, we gain knowledge—the power of analysis—through communication. We communicate by listening and speaking, reading and writing. Good reading strategies, which eventually evolve into habits, increase your capacity to communicate. I have already mentioned that a good listener is not a wall. Similarly, a good reader is not a conduit. Words do not flow through you. You digest and make sense out of them. Just as a persuasive speaker—a good debater for instance—needs to be a critical listener, a persuasive writer must be a critical reader.

In this essay, I have emphasized the interdependence of reading and writing. The more critical and active a reader you become, the more persuasive will be your prose. Likewise, the more time and thought that you put into your writing, the easier you will find critical reading. As you become a better writer and a more critical reader, you will appreciate higher and higher levels of communication.



Your friends will admire you. You will influence more people. You will appreciate that well-written, well-argued text—yours or another's—like a good wine. It will improve with age. It will improve with every reading. Unlike wine, however, such a text will never go sour. Its brilliance and clarity will always shine through. Think about the texts that are widely acclaimed “classics.” Consider what makes the text compelling. Bad writing and argumentation is more akin to vinegar, useful for certain purposes but not worth the time for lengthy appreciation, except perhaps mixed with other ingredients. Unfortunately, much of the writing in the social sciences consists of mediocre table wine.

The problem with bad social science writing is not that it is off target, intellectually not compelling, theoretically unsophisticated, empirically inaccurate, although it may be all of these. Most of these bad writers are really quite smart. They have learned to view the world in new ways. They add to our knowledge about particular subject areas. They only lack sophisticated skills of communication. Readers find the text “difficult” because the analysis lacks clarity and concision. Therefore, the author has failed to make the complex social world easier to understand. Readers will not give the analysis the serious consideration that it may (or may not) deserve. There lies the tragedy of poorly constructed prose.

Think of the manner in which

you usually deal with an especially tough, difficult-to-comprehend text, not the text that you do not understand because its prose is dense but the text that you cannot understand because it is poorly written. You tend to dismiss it.

The next time you encounter a poorly written text, try “playing professor.” Dissect the prose. Assess the language. Pick apart the argument. Play both the critical reader and the persuasive writer. Evaluate it as you would your own prose. Then take the text to your real professor. Imagine the look on his or her face when, instead of complaining how you could not possibly fathom such a “difficult” text, you expose the fallacious reasoning or incorrect parallelisms. You will certainly garner more sympathy, understanding, and help in analyzing the social phenomena under investigation. You might even receive a higher grade. (This tactic is not advisable if your professor wrote the text in question.)

I have mentioned several times that published work is not necessarily well written or well argued. Usually, it is better than your own work, so you can learn from your extensive critical reading. You should be attuned to good and bad writing and argumentation in your own essays and in the texts you read. You will learn to discriminate. You will learn *not* to emulate the poorly written, poorly argued texts. You will learn which techniques can be effective for persuasive argumentation. Remember, reading is only writing backwards.

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## Notes

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