

# Practical Tips for Reading Sociology

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Reading scholarly books and articles critically requires a specific method and strategy that makes it very different from reading for fun, or reading to survey a work. If you care to get the most out of the materials you are assigned, you have to learn to read critically or analytically, that is, to break down an argument into its constituent parts (explanandum, explanans, premises, hypotheses, theorems, laws and mechanisms, conclusions and corollaries, ramifications for other theories or arguments), retrace its major stages and turns, evaluate its strengths, weaknesses, and validity, and grasp its implications (empirical, theoretical, moral, practical, and so forth). Here are some practical tips to help you do just that.

## Always Read with a Purpose

Moving your eyes across a printed page is not critical reading! Reading with a purpose means asking a question (or, better yet, a system of questions) that you keep in mind as you progress and that helps you put the pieces of the puzzle together. So always identify from the outset what the author intends to do in the writing, how she or he proposes to do it, and what kind of arguments she or he develops (causal, historical, interpretive, etc.).

## Scan and Scope the Text Beforehand

You'll do a much better job of picking up the argument(s) in the text if you know in advance what to look for. For this, always scan the full text beforehand: flip through the pages, grab a few paragraphs here and there, pay attention to titles and subtitles, notice highlighted phrases or italics, tables and figures (in particular their captions) — in short, get a rough feel for what's going on there. You can also read the first and last sentence or paragraph of every section, just to become familiar with the substance and tone of the argument(s). Then read the text in depth.

## Read to Identify the Logic of the Piece

This means identifying the problem the author is trying to resolve, the concepts she or he uses or develops for that purpose, the evidence she or he brings to bear on the issue, and the quality of the argument. Make an effort to situate the authors' claims in the broader constellation of literary or cultural theories or research you are familiar with (from class discussion, other classes, other reading you've done — whatever you've experienced that is relevant). Never read a text in isolation: always relate it to relevant texts you've read (among them, those assigned for the same and prior weeks). Literary arguments have a structure; your reading should locate and mimic it.

## Read Differentially

Do not treat all printed text in the same manner. "Democratic" reading is analytically inefficient (even unsound); some parts of a text contain critical conceptual or causal arguments and should be read very cautiously (and repeatedly if necessary); others contain illustrative materials, empirical elaborations, or theoretical digressions and can be read more rapidly (or sometimes

even skipped). So allocate your time and effort wisely, in proportion to the difficulty and significance of the passage.

### **Annotate the Text as you Read**

Read with a pen or pencil in hand and mark the progression, twists, and turns of the argument as it unfolds. You can devise your own stenographic system (arrows, stars, circlings, underlinings, etc.) to highlight in a consistent and economical manner the main names, dates, definitions, and logical turning points, conclusions, and implications, etc. But do not defeat your purpose and highlight everything.

### **Pay Attention to Passages that Confuse**

It may be, as you begin to read scholarship, that the terms or language used by an author may seem confusing, or that the writing may be impenetrable. Be confident that you can still read critically difficult texts, and be aware that reading these texts may take a bit more time than reading prose that is written to be more accessible. Note the source of confusion. Is there a key term being used in an unfamiliar or unclear way? If so, revisit the beginning of the text (or any other passages that set up the framework of the argument) to see if there are helpful definitions. Don't forget that a dictionary is a tremendous aid — it will give you a range of meanings for the term and/or related terms that will allow you to discover, with the help of the surrounding context, what is being said. Is the writing difficult to read on the sentence-level? Try diagramming a sentence, untangling complex syntax, to see if the writer's meaning becomes clear (and then, having learned a bit about the writer's habits, learn what you know to unravel other difficult passages). Ignoring difficult vocabulary or passages will likely leave you unclear about the author's overall work.

### **Notice the Author's Relationship with Other Scholarship**

Are there footnotes and other references to scholarly work? Does that author incorporate others' research without comment, or does the author discuss the pros and cons of this research? An article that engages with other scholarship is likely to have been thought through more thoroughly than one that sticks in references with no articulated reasons.

### **Write Up Notes Immediately After Reading**

If you've read a text with an active analytical intention, you should be able to summarize and reconstruct the main lines of its argument(s). Immediately upon finishing your reading, write, type, or scribble a short recapitulation of what you just absorbed. What was the key question posed by the author, what answers were given to it, what concepts or theories were introduced, what evidence adduced, how does this or that thesis or theory differ from rival views, etc. Use your annotations and marginalia as guides and signposts; if the text introduces new concepts, make a note of them and write down their definition (as given by the author and/or reconstructed by you); if it contrasts several phenomena or theories, enumerate what makes them different or similar. Use whatever devices (tables, lists, bullets, diagrams, etc.) give you the best synoptic and synthetic view of the piece you've read. I highly recommend that you try and diagram the major argument(s) made by the author. If you can draw an author's argument, you likely get it. Your reading notes will be invaluable self-teaching and learning aids as long as you study (and beyond).

## **Reflect Back Upon the Text and Evaluate the Argument**

Never close a book or put away an article without evaluating its argument: was it logically consistent and empirically adequate, plausible or convincing and why (not)? What alternative or rival arguments come to mind? Again, relate the text you've read to others you know (or those mentioned by the author). Never take an author at face value, no matter how famous and authoritative; there is a lot of poor scholarly writing, as in every other kind of writing. It's your job to separate the wheat from the chaff. Also, do not be swayed by emotional appeals and moral exhortations; more often than not, good sentiments hide bad scholarship. Watch out for mere rhetoric!

## **Do Not Hesitate to Read a Text for a Second or Third (or Nth) Time**

A common myth among novice readers is that if you've read well a given text, you're done for life. This makes no sense! A text may be "rediscovered" as many times as there are purposes or occasions for reading it. Genuinely complex and rich texts are profitably read several times over as each reading unearths new layers and treasures.

Remember that reading analytically will save you time, energy, and throbbing headaches come midterms, finals, and paper time!