



10 STRATEGIES FOR UNDERSTANDING DIFFICULT TEXTS

A few tips before you begin:

- **Be sure to read ALL of the strategies first** to ensure that you pick the best strategy for your assignment.
- **Consider combining strategies:** using one strategy is great, but using several together is better!
- **And remember-** many texts you read will be difficult, and they may require “failed” readings before the text can be understood. **“Failed” readings will actually IMPROVE your understanding of a text!**

1. Read slowly and carefully.

When you're reading, don't race to finish your assignment. Take your time with a text. This is especially true for texts that are dense or long because there is more to notice about them. If you read too fast, you will miss important details, or even misread the purpose of the article itself. Notice what each word is saying within a sentence, and how the sentences work together to explain something or make an argument. Also think about how every sentence relates to the author's main points.

3. Highlight, underline, and/or circle information in the text that you think is important.

Organize what you see. Try highlighting the author's thesis and main claims in a different color than the color you use for important details. You could also pick out several colored highlighters or pens and have each color symbolize something different (ex: data, rhetorical devices, specific terms, etc.). Then use this system to dissect a reading into its parts. If you don't have highlighters, you can also use underlining and circling to organize important points.

2. Decide what to read closely and what to skim.

For long articles or long books, you won't have time to read the whole thing. Instead, your job is to figure out what is important enough to read word-for-word and what information is less important that you can skim. Look for key phrases such as “I will argue that...” or “I believe.” Once you have found this “thesis statement,” mark anything in the reading that relates to it. Also, read the first sentence of every paragraph to get a feel for how the author has structured their argument or explains their point.

4. Annotate and make notes in the margins when reading.

Make notes about your reactions to what you're reading. Do you agree or disagree with the author? Do you see another author's claims supported or countered in the text? Do you feel that the author is missing something that you know is important? Jot down these reactions in the margins of the text, on a separate sheet of paper, or create pdf comments. If you can, print out texts and write on them by hand.

(flip over)

Inspired by:

Mokhtari, Kouider, and Carla A. Reichard. “Assessing Students' Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 94, no. 2, 2002, pp. 249-259., doi:10.1037//0022-0663.94.2.249.



5. Think about how the content of the text applies to your writing purpose.

This is a way to focus your reading of a text. Read the assignment or prompt you have been given to write about first. Then, when reading, have the writing product (ex: essay, short assignment, etc.) you will be writing in mind. Only highlight, underline, or circle information that you could reference or build off of in your writing product. If that's not the thesis or what seems important, that's okay. Read from a different angle with confidence.

7. Put ideas presented in the text into your own words.

If you aren't confident that you understood what you just read, take a moment and think about how you would rephrase what the author said in simple language, without adding your own opinions. If you can do this, you might have a good understanding of the article. If not, re-read the important sections and try again. Also, consider talking about the text with a friend who has also read it or a Writing Studio tutor to check that what you're saying is right.

9. Re-read parts you don't understand.

When you don't understand something, don't skip over it or avoid it. Go back and re-read it—twice, three times, even ten times. Some texts are really dense and have so much packed in them that you won't understand without re-reading. And remember, not understanding something the first time isn't a reflection of your intelligence or your capability to understand something. You don't want to miss something important just because it isn't easy to understand.

6. Use reference materials, such as a dictionary.

When you see a word or a term you don't understand in a section that you know is important, don't skip over it. Look it up in an online dictionary, or on Google if it's a discipline-specific term. You can also use general encyclopedias or subject-specific encyclopedias. If you still can't figure out what something means, ask a Writing Studio tutor or a reference librarian.

8. Use context clues.

Context clues are words or phrases that you know you understand that are located around the unknown word or phrase. They can give you an idea of what the unknown word or sentence means without having to look it up. First, note if the words or phrases you understand have a positive or negative meaning, because the word or phrase you don't understand will most likely either follow or contradict this meaning. Also, if you're looking at the definition of a word in a dictionary and don't know which one to pick, read the sentences around the word to figure out which definition applies.

10. Meet with your professor when you are confused.

Sometimes you might read something that you are struggling to understand, and you ask friends or a Writing Studio tutor for help and they can't offer much. This is where your professor, the expert, comes in. Professors love talking with students, and every professor at SPU wants their students to succeed. You taking initiative for your own learning will not only help you understand the confusing text better, but will make a great impression on your professor. Take advantage of this chance to learn from people with master's degrees and PhD's.