

UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER MINI-COURSE

## Better Reading Strategies

Try answering the following “word problem”:

A student came into the Writing Center for help on a literature paper. The text he was required to analyze was *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, published in book form in 1902. The student said the novel was boring, and it put him to sleep. He hardly remembered a word of it. He was visiting the Writing Center on a Friday, and his paper was due on Monday. In the form of a percentage, what were his chances of doing well on the paper?

Listen to what two professors who teach writing have to say about reading:

[Effective] reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say. In fact, one of the difficult things about reading is that the pages before you will begin to speak only when the authors are silent and you begin to speak in their place, sometimes for them, doing their work, continuing their projects, and sometimes for yourself, following your own agenda.

--Dave Bartholmae and Anthony Petrosky, *Ways of Reading*

The literature student’s *required* agenda was to find meaning in *Heart of Darkness* and to articulate that meaning. His *preferred* agenda was to avoid the pain of reading a difficult book because he had never learned how to wrestle with words.

How do you find your way into the “push and shove” of a challenging text you have not chosen to read but are required to read?

Keith Hjortshoj (pronounced Yorts-hoy) writes in his book *The Transition to College Writing*, 2nd ed., about the difference between “passive, linear” reading and “predatory” reading. The terms themselves suggest different body postures. For example, if you lie down to read a difficult text, what is likely to happen?

**To become a predatory reader, focus on the following questions before you start reading** (adapted from pages 31-55):

**“What am I reading?”** Any assigned reading qualifies, especially a text you are tempted to avoid.

**“Why am I reading it?”** Because you *must* to succeed/pass/not fail may be your simplest, most honest answer.

### “How can I read it ... efficiently?”

Very few texts are intended to be read straight through from beginning to end. Poetry, short stories, and novels *are* examples, where the writer has chosen specific words in a specific order—often after much revision—to build meaning on multiple levels. Poetry, short stories, and novels *deserve* to be read in a straight line, sometimes more than once, and discussed at length.

On the other hand, the majority of academic texts are organized to provide several ways of reading them—by chapter titles, by headings, by sub-headings, and ultimately, by paragraphs. Formatting helps a reader navigate a text as an explorer would a foreign territory, scanning the overall environment for the most important information. As Hjortshoj writes, “Analytical scanning is ... like examining a topographical map or aerial photograph of a whole area: studying the structure of the landscape and noting high points or centers of importance. Not bound to any linear path, your vision can move in any direction, focus closely, or widen to encompass the whole” (51). To begin your navigation, follow the guidelines below:

- For book-length texts, survey the table of contents and chapter titles.
- Within chapters and article-length texts, survey headings and sub-headings.
- Decide which *sections* of an assigned text appear to be the most useful for your required agenda (classroom discussion, essay exam, research paper).
- Focusing on ONLY ONE USEFUL SECTION AT A TIME, first read the introduction, next read only the first *significant* sentence (topic sentence) and the last sentence (concluding sentence) of each body paragraph, and then read the conclusion.
- What do you understand about your subject now?
- Which sections are still pertinent to your agenda?
- Within the pertinent sections, which paragraphs promise useful information?
- Read the useful paragraphs in full, word by word. Look up unfamiliar words in your favorite online dictionary\* and apply their meaning to the current context.
- What do you know now?
- What, if anything, do you need to read further?

\*Useful online general dictionaries include [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com) (link) and [Merriam-Webster.com](http://Merriam-Webster.com) (link). Ask your instructor(s) for recommendations on discipline-specific dictionaries.

### “How can I remember what [I’ve read]?”

Many of us like to think successful students are born with the ability to remember whatever they want to whenever they need to. Not so, according to Hjortshoj: “*Not* remembering is actually the norm, and forgetting occurs very rapidly unless you take some active measures to retain information” (34).

Use the following strategies to help yourself remember what you’ve read. You will have to write in your books, including your rental texts (*you have permission from the bookstore to do so*).

1. Highlight the route you take as a “predatory” reader, using one color for main points and a contrasting color for supporting points.
2. Make notes in the margins of difficult and/or obviously important sections. Include *as many* of the following as possible:
  - a. Your rewording of the material;
  - b. Questions to ask your professor or fellow students;
  - c. Counter-arguments you can think of;
  - d. Connections you can make to a related, more familiar topic;
  - e. Concrete, specific examples you can think of.
3. Remember as a rule of thumb: *You can only put information you understand into your own words, but at the same time, challenging yourself to put new information into your own words invites you to wrestle toward a more complete understanding.*

To further network the information into your long-term memory:

1. Use your highlighted predatory route and notes to construct an informal outline. Pay attention to the difference between main points and supporting points.
2. Use your informal outline to compose an accurate summary of the writer’s points.

Now you have a valuable document for quickly refreshing your memory later, much easier than trying to find your way back into an unmarked text.

Hjortshoj makes a bold claim: *“It you become adept [through practice] at scanning in this way, you can ‘read’ an entire book in twenty or thirty minutes. If you take notes in the process, you will end up with a more useful understanding of its content than you would have if you had spent several hours reading it from cover to cover in a passive, linear fashion”* (52).

Consider the progress you can make scanning one chapter from a textbook or an article in a scholarly journal and making the annotations we suggest above.

...composed by Barbara Hardie, University Writing Center Mini-Course, August 2001. Revised 2010.

Work Cited:

Hjortshoj, Keith. *The Transition to College Writing*. 2nd ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. Print.