

## How to Read

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Here are some informal and partial remarks designed to help Macalester (and other) students read. In the most basic sense, of course, most of you learned how to read years ago, in kindergarten if not before. The type of reading I discuss here, however, is at another level: call it close reading, analytic reading, combative reading, meta-reading, active reading, graduate-school reading, engaged reading, reading with passion, insight, suspicion, pressure, a whiskey and a knife.

Here I am not talking about passive reading — “I’ve turned all the pages and passed my eyes over the words; I’ve got a general idea of what the text says, and so now my work is done.” I am also not talking about the type of reading that leaves to your professor, or to classroom discussion, the real work of evaluating, judging, interpreting, contextualizing, supplying meaning. Those passive types of reading are fine for many purposes, such as passing Friday’s quiz, or having some basic background before you go into situation X or Y. A reasonably large chunk of the reading you’ll do in life can be profitably undertaken in that way. But those passive types of reading are unacceptable for situations in which you want to *take responsibility* for your knowledge and beliefs.

The type of active reading I am talking about is also not exclusively devotional or exclusively for-pleasure reading. Devotional and pleasure reading have their own time-honored protocols, which I shall not engage here. I trust, however, that the type of reading discussed here is not antithetical to devotional or pleasure reading. They should work well, in varying proportions, all three at once.

So what do I mean by active reading? First off, habit: read with a pen in your hand and *write back*. Circle words, put !! and ?? at times in the margin, scrawl an objection, put a star next to a key sentence or phrase. At the end of each section (how big this is will depend on whether you’re reading a fourteen-line sonnet or a 405-page book), summarize and/or react to what’s been said. At the end of the whole reading, write ten or twenty lines summarizing the summaries. Or type it online and save it for later use. Articulate in your own words the message of the piece. Toss your highlighter pen in the garbage, or only use it as a supplement: it does not give *you* enough voice.

Some folks need to sell texts back at the end of the semester, and will be hesitant to use a pen. So go out and buy some post-it notepads. Scrawl on these and stick them in appropriate points in the text.

What should you look for? Well, *everything*. Who wrote the text and when? Who published it and why? What’s the book’s title? Who wrote the blurbs on the back and what did they say? Who does the author thank in her acknowledgments? What are his first and last words, and epigraph if he includes one? How is it organized? What and/or who are the first and last footnotes? What nation and era produced this book, and could it have been produced in another nation and/or at a different time? *Always historicize*, by which I mean always ask yourself what it was about the specific historical moment of the book’s writing which gave rise to its existence, message, and form. If the book concerns, say, the 1740s, was written in 1921, and your edition was printed in 1992, this yields four interlinked questions: what does the text say about the first date, why was it written in the second, why (by who, where, for what reason) was it printed in the third, and why has it gotten to your hands now.

Always biographize, as well. What is it about the author’s life that led to the writing of this book? The author’s race, ethnicity, language, education, class, health, religion, gender, family, political affiliation, gender preference, profession and more may all have played a role in the production of the

text, though the text can *not* be, finally, reducible to those components. Indeed, as a thought experiment, ask yourself: how would you interpret this text had it been written by someone else?

What, also, of the *form* of the text? I have been speaking here of “books,” but texts may mean or operate differently if they are, say, essays, road signs, cereal-box blurbs, epitaphs, etc.: books are not the “natural,” given, basic, or neutral form in which words appear. Also, within the text’s form, always *genericize*. That is, what genre is this text? Given what it says (and let’s suppose it’s a book), is it a novel, a history, memoir, how-to, sociological study? And if, for example, a novel, of what type? Epistolary, surreal, Gothic, *bildungsroman*, comic, detective, Harlequin, or some other? Then ask yourself if there isn’t some content in the form itself. What does it mean that it was written in this fashion? Could this science fiction novel have been presented as a philosophical dialogue, work of cultural theory, graffiti, sociology text, or anything else, and if so how would it have differed? And what language and language tradition (or national or other tradition) does it take part in?

Read the words closely. Look for little tics or signals. *Of course* often flags the weakest point of any argument. *Merely* is often an attempt to denigrate what the author fears most. *Pure, genuine*, and their semantic cousins (real, authentic, natural, true, etc.) are often attempts to hide or banish their supposed opposites. *Objectively speaking* might be a patch for the reverse. *Precisely* may mean the opposite. Look out for the words “we,” “us,” and “our,” and figure out to whom they refer: they give a good sense of who is in- and ex-cluded. For the same reasons, note instances of “they” or “them.”

Are some words or sentences in parentheses? And if so, why (assume that the reason might be other than that the information within them is less important)? Are some sections of the book written simply and other parts more complexly? If so, what does that mean about the content of those sections? What are the key terms used in the book — the words used over and over, the basic categories, the concepts, or at times metaphors, that “do a lot of work” for the author. Do they make sense?

What about voice? Michel Foucault advises that the First Question is: “Who is speaking?” By this he means, who among the totality of people who might speak on this issue has been given the right to speak here? Whose voices, if any, are *not* present in this text? These, and most all of the other questions here, are useful in analyzing both fiction and non-fiction.

Think about bigger stories these books might resemble. Is this the story of the Fall? Of growth and flourishing? Of struggle between opposites? Is there a Bible story or some other major cultural text underneath the book’s argument? What of imagery, symbolism, and analogy? And at some level you must take on the argument itself: *what* is the author (or the text, if you prefer) trying to get across, argue for, convince you of? And *how* is the argument made? With examples, anecdotes, analogies, passions, formal or logical argumentation? And what’s the quality of that argument?

Think about the book’s mood: is it angry, dispassionate, self-effacing, understated, stultifying, academic, speculative, exhaustively data-filled . . . and why or why not? *Compare* the book to other books on similar topics: how are they similar or different? Do they refer to each other explicitly? And what does this text *avoid* saying? All of the above questions may be asked in a comparative fashion.

Finally, this isn’t “a formula to use”: it would be crazy to read something and ask all these questions of every sentence. As with a good family doctor or an expert car mechanic, after lots of practice doing it a whole range of diagnostic questions ends up floating in your head, all available, and some shifting subset of them comes into play, somewhat by habit and somewhat by instinct, in each new situation. *Read tons; you’ll get better the more you do.* The ideas provided here, and practice, will get you rolling.