

Reading Hints: For Greater Efficiency and Comprehension (and Less Time)

My courses, especially upper-level history courses, typically assign a lot of reading. Knowing how to approach this will help make the course more manageable.

Reading Secondary Sources (you cannot take the following advice with primary sources—sorry!)

Much of the reading you do for class is from secondary sources. Those are sources written by scholars using primary data (i.e., documents and other materials produced by participants or observers in the past). They range widely in style and quality, but you can generally count on most of them to follow predictable patterns. Knowing those patterns can allow you to use them more expeditiously.

Historians, and many other scholars, generally write their most important points at the beginnings and ends of things—of books, of chapters, of sub-sections, of paragraphs. So, most of the time, you should concentrate your reading energy, time, and effort there. Often, you will not need to pay attention at all (i.e., you can skip) much of what is in the middle.

Try the following reading strategy. Read the introduction and conclusion of the book or article first, very carefully, word-for-word. Work to understand the main topics covered in the source, the scope (e.g., time covered, subjects addressed), and, most importantly, the argument. The argument is almost always the most important thing for you to know and understand. Authors will construct their arguments using various evidence, which they will present in the middle of things—books, chapters, sub-sections, and paragraphs. Understanding what the evidence is basically is necessary, but most of the time knowing and remembering the details of all that evidence is not going to matter to you. So, don't spend a lot of mental energy reading it, taking notes on it, and remembering it. If you find you need that information for a paper or other reason, you can go back and look it up.

After reading the introductory and concluding chapters of the book, go to the first chapter and read the first couple pages and the last couple pages. Often, they will be marked off by paragraph breaks or sub-chapter headings. Pay close attention to what the author introduces and concludes. Do the same thing with sub-sections, reading the first and last paragraphs first. Then, depending on your time, your comfort level with the material, and your interest in the topic or need to understand, read the first and last sentence of the paragraphs. For material you encounter that you find absolutely fascinating, read everything. Or, for material that makes little sense in the “skimmed” form, read the material within paragraphs to see if it makes more sense.

At first, reading this way—often called “gutting” a book—feels awkward or even like you are cheating. I assure you that you are not cheating, and the awkwardness will go away with practice. Gutting books and articles will allow the reading assignments to go more quickly, making the course more manageable. Also, though, you will often find that you understand the material better when you gut it, because all the details will not be clouding your mind. It will be easier, in a manner of speaking, to see the forest without all the trees. Most of the time, that's all that is necessary for course work. Finally, reading this way will free up time so that you can actually read more. Obviously, there are times when you cannot gut, but I think with practice you will be able to do it most of the time and find academic success.

Reading this way is a very active process. Lounging on a couch with the television blaring won't work. You have to consciously focus on small pieces of reading, stopping to make sure you've understood the main points before moving on, or you'll reach the end of the book without a clue what it was about.

All of the preceding advice goes double or triple for graduate students. If you want to be successful in graduate school, you will have to read far more than you have time to read. Gutting books and articles, then, is the

only way to survive. When you become adept at this, you will be rewarded. For instance, I can generally know a book thoroughly enough to speak knowledgeably about it after two hours of gutting.

Taking Notes

The foregoing is predicated in part on you taking good notes, though. Simply skimming through a book, a chapter, or an article and putting it aside is unlikely to yield great success unless you are lucky enough to have a photographic memory. Since most of us are not so lucky, it is necessary to take good notes.

I have found that writing in texts helps me. Not just highlighting, but marginal notations. I often write “arg.” in the margin when the author is arguing something. I might write numbers in the margin when the author is enumerating the four reasons something happened. I will refer to other texts in the margin, so I can see when the author is adding to something I already am familiar with. You certainly have developed your own note-taking strategies you should use and develop further.

More than writing while I read, I am most successful when I take the time to take notes after I have read a chapter. I try to write a cogent paragraph in my own words that summarizes the argument presented in a chapter or an article. The paragraph might be half a page. If I cannot boil down the essential argument in that amount of space, I am probably including too much detail. If it takes only a couple sentences, I’ve probably missed too much. Writing these summary paragraphs about chapters helps in several ways. One, it puts the author’s point in my own words. If I cannot do that, I can learn then—and not four hours before the paper is due—that I did not quite understand the point. Thus, I can go back and figure out what confused me or get help before moving on. Two, when I go back to write about the source, I have already begun articulating my thoughts about it. Often when writing a book, a review, or a lecture, I simply go to my notes and cut and paste my summary. It is far easier than going back through the book, searching for the right information.