



How to Read a Text

1. **Think of it as a Time Machine.** Despite the fact that the text may seem to be fifty pages of complicated concepts rendered in antiquated and torturous prose, resist the temptation to look at it as a form of cruel and unusual punishment, sprung from the pen of a long-winded, long-dead author whose only goal in life was to oppress and/or bore others to death. In reality, written texts are time machines that allow us to have a dialogue with people from whom we are normally separated, due to the formidable barriers of time and space. Through the process of reading, we can converse with Plato, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Abraham Lincoln, and Vladimir Putin.
2. **Have a Conversation.** Reading really is a dialogue, a conversation between you and the writer. What are the implications of such a way of thinking? It means that you need to be attentive, listening carefully to the author, but also questioning and challenging the author when what she/he is saying doesn't make sense to you, or doesn't fit with your experience, or doesn't seem to be well supported by facts. So read the text, any text, with an attitude of respectful skepticism. Respect the author and his/her expertise, but maintain a critical eye and willingness to challenge the author where necessary. And, just like the author, when you disagree and challenge her/his claims, you need to back up your critiques with accurate information, solid arguments, and convincing evidence. "I don't like the book" is not convincing evidence.
3. **Do a Background Check.** When you take up a text for the first time, you need to know some basic facts about it:
 - a) When was it written? What were the important issues at that time? What are some significant differences between then and now? What technology and knowledge do we have that the writer didn't have? What was the context (political, social, economic) in which the text was written?
 - b) Is it a Primary Source or Secondary Source text? In other words, was the author an eyewitness to the events, or did he or she write about the events much later, using either the eyewitness accounts of others, or other secondary source authors who also didn't witness the event? (In the legal world, that's called "hearsay.")
4. **Cross-examine the Text.** Make it answer these questions:
 - a. Who is the intended audience (voters, soldiers, students, foreigners, the masses, the elites, the priests, the worshippers, the king, the citizens, etc.)?
 - b. What is the genre (news report, novel, hagiography, autobiography, personal letter, popular article, book, essay, sermon, poem, diary, legal statute, battle hymn, etc.)?



- c. Why did the author use this particular genre to convey his/her ideas?
 - d. Is the text descriptive or is it prescriptive? In other words, does it aim to report on something (describe), or to persuade someone (prescribe)?
 - e. What seem to be the larger goals of the text? Does it aim to condemn, control, protect, reinforce, obfuscate, justify, terrify, etc?
 - f. What is the writer's method of achieving his/her goals? Does this text claim to be divinely inspired, or to be based on irrefutable logic? Is it an emotional appeal, a "jump on the bandwagon" argument, satire, an attempt to silence the opposition, an argument via metaphor, a parable, etc?
 - g. What is the author's POV (point of view)? Put another way, what are some of the author's presuppositions and biases: men>women (misogyny or sexism); lighter skin color is superior to darker skin color (racism); there was an idyllic time much earlier in history that was much better than today (repristination); our culture is superior to all other cultures; monarchy is the best form of government; the important things in history happen because important people made the right decisions (the "great man" view of history); everything in history is part of a war between the upper and lower classes (Marxism); etc. Because these are presuppositions and biases, they are often assumed, rather than explicitly stated in the text. Remember that every author has presuppositions and biases. Your job is to identify them so that you can better analyze and critique the author's argument.
5. **Be Aware of Your POV.** As historians, we must recognize and critique our own presuppositions as well, such as: our gods are >their gods; we are smarter than earlier generations; people in the past thought just the same way we do; history is bunk (Henry Ford's famous observation); only the most powerful people in society can effect change, thus the little people, like us, are powerless and exempted from responsibility; etc. Since reading a text is really a dialogue, be sure you understand both your own and the author's POV.
6. **Some Strategies for Tackling Tough Texts:**
- a. **Harness the power of solar energy.** It's much easier to read (and stay awake) if you read in in natural daylight, and the morning when you are well rested, rather than in the evening when you are physically and mentally exhausted. If you consistently fall asleep while reading, find a time of day when you are more alert (and never read in bed).
 - b. Studies prove that the best way to retain information from a text is to **READ, REST, RE-READ**. In more detail: read the text through once, do a mental review of what you just read, then put the book down for a few hours to a day. Then, before you start your re-read, do a quick mental review to recall what you read the day before, and do the same after the re-read.



- c. With some texts, you might want to consider reading through the text twice, once more quickly, not trying to understand every word or sentence but simply to get a sense for the general issues; and a second time to dig into the particulars.
 - d. **ULMN = Underlining and Marginal Notation.** Mark the text carefully so that you will have easy access to the material for class discussions and paper writing. Identify significant ideas or information, make clear, simple notations in the margins to remind you of those ideas, and underline key words to help you quickly find the location of the idea on the page. Be sure to underline, but **DON'T UNDERLINE EVERYTHING**, because that's the same as underlining nothing.
 - e. Take reading notes, but **DON'T REWRITE THE TEXT.** You may have a method of taking reading notes that works for you. If so, stick with it, but if you are looking for some new ideas, the following works for me; I underline, though not too much, and write in the margins where necessary. At the end of each page (and each section), I pause to think about what I've just read, choose three or four keywords to describe the most important concepts on that page, then write them out clearly at the top of the page. At the end of each chapter, I pause for a few minutes to be sure I know what the author's main points were, and again record a few key words or phrases. Sometimes, after I finish a book, I write a brief summary of the contents, including my own critiques and insights, and place it between the pages of the book for future reference.
7. **NEVER AVOID WRITING IN YOUR TEXT IN HOPES OF RESELLING THE BOOK.** Given your tuition at Lab, that's penny-wise but pound-foolish.