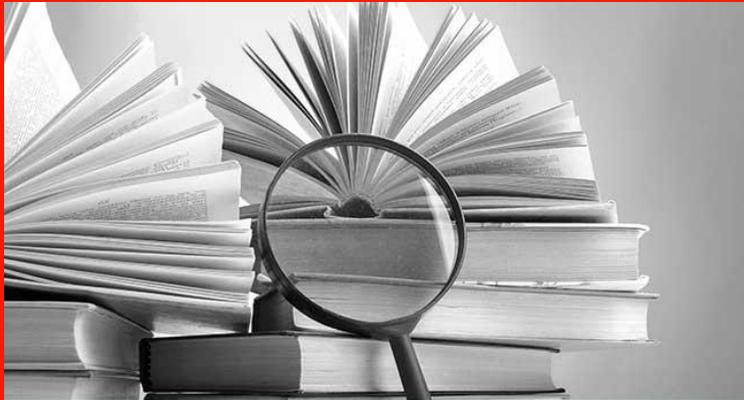


Reading for Research Projects



Prepared by Kristen Brookes, Amherst College
Writing Center, for use in conjunction with remote,
synchronous workshop. kgbrookes88@amherst.edu

Words on Reading from Amherst College Professors



Read in order to learn how to read; read to exercise your reading muscles.

Books are tools for your own thinking.

I don't expect my students to come to class with a full understanding of everything. Otherwise, why would we meet? I want them to be able to participate in the conversation.

You have a greater obligation to understand an author's argument than you do to read every single word.

You are actually better off skimming than you are reading every word.

A book is like an orange to a starving person. You should be able to inspect it quickly, figure out what parts of it are worth eating, then rip the skin off and devour it. Once you have squeezed out all the juice and pulp you need, toss it aside and grab the next orange off the tree.

Establish a purpose for reading



- Establishing a purpose for reading before you read will help you read more effectively and, in some cases, more efficiently.
- If you know *why* you are reading a given text, you can adjust *how* you read (how quickly, how carefully, how much/what kind of annotation, etc.).
- You may also want to read different sections of a text differently, slowing down for key ideas, speeding up when you are familiar with the material, and skipping repetitive or irrelevant parts.
- Making a habit of this (whether for your own research or for class) can also help you develop confidence about making your own choices about where to focus your reading energy, so that you engage with texts in ways that are most meaningful to you.

Some reasons for reading while researching



This is a still of the sign for "because" in ASL.

Why might I read a particular source?

- To determine whether it might be useful to your project.
- To develop a broad understanding of your topic or of the context surrounding it
- To gather particular data, facts, or pieces of information
- To refine your topic or move from a topic to a specific research question
- To develop a sense of the scholarly conversations related to your topic and start to discover your own place in those conversations

You might want to discover: What arguments have been made? How do people's positions compare or speak to one another? What work might there be for you to do in this field? What puzzle do you see emerging? What gaps are there in the scholarship? What questions remain unanswered or have not even been asked?

- To help develop an answer to the big question you are asking, and later, to test the answer you have been developing—through finding evidence that supports *and* counters your claim, as well as evidence that might lead you to modify your claim
- To challenge, complicate, or extend your thinking

More reasons to read for your research project



- It's important. This is “the” seminal, authoritative, or hot book/article on the subject. This is the text to which *everyone* in the field refers and/or responds.
- To develop an understanding of a theoretical concept or a theoretical or methodological approach you might like to use in your project.
- To gain an understanding of different theoretical/methodological approaches scholars have used in this field/topic of study.
- To consider as a model for an approach, methodology, organizational scheme...
- To write about it:
 - for a literature review or an introductory section that presents the scholarly conversation
 - to provide context for your argument (historical context, locating your subject in relation to other contemporaneous ones)
 - to engage critically with the scholar's argument
- It's fascinating!
 - Reading this source is likely to energize you, make you excited about your project, help shape your thinking about your topic, deepen your understanding, raise new questions, or point you in new directions. And it will just be plain fun!

Reading from the Outside In

Become
well-acquainted
with a book in
just 10 minutes!

- **Goal:** develop a clear sense of a text's purpose, argument, contents, and organizational scheme, as well as a *strategy* for how to develop a fuller understanding of the book.
- **Start from the outside**
 - cover, table of contents, index.
- **Move from the outside in**
 - Focus on the preface, introduction, and conclusion. Look for places that articulate the project's purpose, project, and method.
 - Read the beginnings and endings of each chapter (or paragraph, for an article).
 - Skim through any chapters or sections that seem especially relevant or compelling.

What did you see from the
“outside in”?



Share what you learned through spending just 10 min.
with your book.

Tell about the book

- What is the author's project or purpose?
- What does the book argue?
- How does the book make its argument?

Tell (and show) *how to read* the book

- What did you notice about how this book works?
- Did you find any places where the author's project, purpose, or argument was laid out?
- With more time, how would you go about reading this book more or more deeply? How would go about reading it for your specific project?

Tips for Research Reading



Do's and Don't's

- You don't have to (and probably can't/shouldn't) read everything that has been published on your topic.
- Do consider the value of “virtuous” distractions. Are you becoming immersed in fascinating tangents? Do you need to get back on track? Do these tangents suggest a new direction for your thesis?
- Avoid what Wayne Booth calls “piecemeal” reading or “raiding” texts for evidence (93). Make sure you understand the relationship between the parts you read and the larger argument.

Writing while Researching



- Rather than moving abruptly from researching to writing (and being faced with a blank screen), write throughout your research process.
- You can use writing to *plan* your project, gather evidence, *record* other people's arguments, *respond* to readings, *develop* your own ideas and *distinguish* them from others', and *reflect* on where you are in your project and where to go next.
 - For examples, models, and prompts, see this [handout](#).
- To move from writing for yourself to writing for an audience (or from note-taking to something more coherent), try
 - Writing weekly [narratives of your research](#)
 - Submitting regular informal papers to your advisor
 - Assembling a skeleton portfolio

More Tips for Research Reading



- Make a conscious decision about how to approach each text.
- Establish your purpose for reading and consider how carefully or quickly you ought to read.
- Choose the best time and place for reading.
- For a given reading session, plan how much time you will spend reading what.
- Read for 50 minutes, then take a 10-minute mental break.
- Write as you read!
- Have fun!

Practice reading strategically!

For a period of a week, choose one or two reading strategies to try out; these may include where, when, and how much at a time.

To build on the summer research table session, try this:

- Set a purpose for reading each text
- Spend a few minutes reading it from the outside in
- Determine, based on your purpose and on what you've learned about its content and structure, how to approach that text
- Try out the approach you've planned, then reflect on how it worked.

Questions? Looking for an individual reading consultation? Email [Kristen Brookes](mailto:Kristen.Brookes) or writing@amherst.edu.