



Reading Skills

Although **reading** is generally held to be a rather basic study skill which does not require any further explanation, there are two reasons why it is necessary to reflect on it in some detail:

- a) being a student of literature, reading will naturally be your main activity;
- b) obtaining information from primary/secondary literature purposefully and efficiently is the essential prerequisite for any other activity connected with your studies.

1. General Hints

No matter whether you are reading a primary text such as a novel or a secondary text such as an article, please consider the following:

Refrain from simply *consuming* a text passively; instead, be an **active** reader, who attempts to obtain as much information as possible and continuously reflects on what s/he reads critically.

Always consider a text in its **respective context**; thus, be aware of the historical and socio-cultural context in which a literary text was written, and work through a single chapter of a theoretical monograph bearing in mind the subject matter of the entire secondary source, its line of argument and its objective.

In order to work effectively, read a text for **a specific purpose**.

Have a **pencil and/or a marker pen** ready to mark passages that serve your purpose and make notes – provided that you *own* the respective copy of a book or have photocopied relevant essays/chapters. It is important to **record your findings** in such a way that you are able to recall the respective text after a longer period of time (e.g. when you sit down to write your term paper or when you revise for your final exams).

Summarise the plot of a primary source or the main theses of a secondary source **in your own words** in order to check whether you have understood the respective text.

Attempt to **link** what you have just read **with your prior knowledge** about the topic, facilitating the storage of newly acquired information in your long-term memory.

Critically reflect on both divergences between your prior knowledge and what you have just learned from a text, and completely new information,

2. Reading Primary Literature (poems/novels/drama etc.)

In addition to the above-mentioned, please heed the following pieces of advice when you read a literary text:

Since you study *English* literature, you are faced with the task of fully understanding **foreign-language works of literature**; however, **looking up** every single word that you do not understand will make your reading process time-consuming, exhausting and far from enjoyable. You should try to understand difficult passages with the help of their **context** (so keep reading) and only look up recurring key terms or words/phrases that you consider necessary in order to keep the thread. When reading a text such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), it is advisable to consult the **Oxford English Dictionary**, for it is a historical dictionary recording the meaning of words and phrases at different stages in the history of the English language [you can access an online version of the OED via the SLUB homepage].

In order to expand your vocabulary quickly is to mark those words or phrases that you are not familiar with, put them on your personal list of newly acquired vocabulary and revise them.

How meticulously you have to study a primary text in order to understand it thoroughly also depends on the **genre** to which it belongs; for instance, reading a short story usually entails looking up more (if not all unknown) words than reading a novel.

Apart from pencil marks and notes, you may find it helpful to employ your own **set of symbols** in order to indicate specific pieces of information: e.g. you could draw boxes around locations that are mentioned, encircle recurring key terms, or put an exclamation mark next to an important passage.

You can only arrive at a profound understanding of a literary text if you read it **more than once**: while a first reading provides you with an overview of setting, characters, plot, leitmotifs, formal peculiarities etc., a second reading enables you both to pay special attention to important passages, motifs or formal characteristics, and to understand the literary text on a 'deeper' level owing to your previously acquired knowledge about what will happen next, what somebody/something hints at or why someone behaves in a certain way; any additional reading (e.g. directing your attention at the topic of your term paper) will deepen your understanding further (cf. *hermeneutical circle*).

Since it is impossible for anyone to memorise all salient features with regard to content and form of any work of literature that they have ever read, you may find it helpful to set up your own **database of English literature** containing notes on the texts you have dealt with; your database may consist of handwritten entries in a folder, documents on your PC or a card index.

Last but not least, although this way of working with literary texts is more taxing than passive consumption, you shall never lose your love of literature and **enjoy reading**.

3. Reading Secondary Literature (article/monograph)

When you read a secondary source, please take the following into consideration:

If you aim at a **precise and comprehensive understanding** of a text (e.g. since it is required preparatory reading for an exam),

- you should get a general overview of both the author's main theses and the structure of her/his line of argument, and mark unknown terminology or difficult passages in the course of a **first reading**,
- having looked up new terminology and worked out the passages you found hard to grasp, you should systematically read the text again. Throughout the **second reading**, deepen your understanding of the content and realise the structure of the argumentation, marking key words and subdividing the text into units,
- recording your findings, you should go over the source text for a **third** time and note down what each section deals with using your own words.

If you intend to read a text in order to **find out a specific piece of information**,

- you should, first of all, get an insight into the structure of an essay/monograph: read the title as well as subtitles of an essay or the introduction as well as the table of contents of a monograph to find out which sections/chapters will contain the information you are looking for. Skim these passages/chapters, detecting relevant sections,
- being aware of the respective context of these sections, work them through meticulously,
- record your findings, using **notes** which are as short as possible and as long as you need them to be in order to be able to recall the secondary text after a longer period of time; use actual 'notes' or write sentences, depending on your specific style of working.

If you record any QUOTATIONS,

- cite them correctly and note down the exact source of the quote in parentheses (page/s),
- employ your own system of signs, abbreviation, colours, etc.,
- organise your research of secondary literature in a (paper or electronic) file.