

# Active Reading: Or, What They Should Have Told You About How to Read for College

A brief overview of Bauer's *The Well-Educated Mind*.

## Trivium – 3 Stages of Learning

1. **Grammar** – Building blocks and/or the foundation. You absorb information just like you did in elementary school. This stage involves memorization and repetition. You should be familiar with material, but you don't have to analyze it yet.
2. **Logic** – Critical thinking. You begin to use analytic skills: is information correct or incorrect? You also draw connections between cause and effect, historical events, scientific phenomena, words, and their meanings.
3. **Rhetoric** – You learn to express your opinion about facts you have accumulated (grammar) and evaluated (logic).

It is impossible to analyze on your first reading of a text.

- You need to grasp central ideas (**Grammar**) before you can evaluate them.
- **Logic** questions to ask:
  - Are the ideas presented accurately?
  - Are the conclusions valid?
- Then **Rhetoric** questions ask:
  - What do you think about these ideas?
  - Do you agree or disagree?
  - Why?

## The Modern Adult Reading Habit:

Most people skip Grammar and Logic and jump straight into Rhetoric. They also tend to give their opinion long before they've had a chance to understand the topic under study (like most call-in radio shows). We were taught this way since elementary school, when teachers and tests asked us for our opinions before we fully understood the material.

“Serious reading is hard work”

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Now, in college, you must train your mind to learn.

So how do you begin to train your mind?

Use these techniques to study one subject at a time (most likely, your most difficult class or classes in your major).

1. Know when to read.
2. Morning tends to be better than evening. In the evening, you are tired or very busy with your life. If you schedule time in the morning, your world will be calmer and it will be easier to focus.
3. Start short. Begin with a half hour of reading first thing every morning. Develop the habit of concentrating and thinking, and then begin to extend the amount of time you read.
4. Don't schedule yourself for study every day of the week. Your mind needs a break, so try to study at least four days a week.
5. Never check your email, MySpace, Facebook, etc. right before you begin to read. It sucks away your time, and you will suddenly realize that an hour or two has passed and your day must begin with no time for reading.
6. When you gather data from websites or newspapers, you become informed and collect facts. When you *read*, you develop wisdom, understand ideas, and use it to understand the facts you've gathered.

“The serious reader is not attempting to assimilate a huge quantity of information as quickly as possible, but to understand a few many-sided and elusive ideas.”

### Grammar Stage Reading – What does the author say?

#### Keep Reading

The first time you read a book, don't feel like you're failing if you can't grasp every point the author makes. If a section completely confounds you, mark it, and then simply turn the page and move on. You can always return to the section later and read it closely. You don't have to “get it” the first time!

Especially with fiction, the first few chapters are devoted to introducing characters. Don't stop and try to sort out everything. Usually by the fourth chapter or so it will all begin to make sense. The central characters will still be hanging around and the unimportant ones will fade away.

**Your goal** on the **first reading** of a text is to have general familiarity so that when you come back for a second reading, you will be able to progress to the Logic and Rhetoric stages.

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## Practice taking notes as you read (Annotation)

Write out a question you have at a confusing passage and move on. When you return on your second reading, you may find that the rest of the text answered your question, or you will most likely find it easier to answer now that you have read the whole text and have seen the larger picture.

- You can underline, circle, star, or otherwise mark the text, and then write out summary information or notes in the margins.
- If you are afraid that marking up your book will make it difficult to sell back to the bookstore, use post-it notes and/or notebook paper.
- If using notebook paper, write down the page number and at least the first few words of the quote so you know where you are in the text. Then, write out your thoughts or observations.

All this will seem slow at first, but it will help you immensely to remember the text and give you a starting point for writing essays.

On the first reading, **don't take an excessive amount of notes**. You'll probably end up writing a lot of observations on trivial matters, and this will slow down your first reading of the text. Instead, at the end of each substantial section or chapter, write down a sentence or two that summarizes content, main assertion, or most important event – that's it. The notes in this first reading are creating a broad outline, nothing more. Leave out a lot of details, even important ones – you can return to them later on your second reading.

Questions to ask yourself:

What happened in this section?

What is the most important point the writer makes in this section?

What else does the writer tell me about this important point that I'd like to remember?

Write questions you have

Are you agreeing or disagreeing with the writer?

If any connections or reflections come to mind, write them down as well. Put down page numbers by comments so you know where they go.

Congratulations, your first reading of the book is done!

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### Logic Reading Questions: Why the author says what he says and How

- Reread sections of the book you identified as difficult.
  - Do they now make sense? Are your comments clustered in certain portions of the book? If so, reread those sections.
- Look back at your summaries.
  - Which chapter contains the climax, the center of the author's argument, or the author's own summary of the work? Reread that chapter as well.

Look at the book's structure.

Why did the author write this book? What did the author set out to do?

How well did the writer succeed in his/her mission? Did the author successfully carry out his/her intention? Why or why not? Where does the author fall short?

Are any emotional scenes flat? What part of the books did you find convincing, and which ones left you unmoved?

*For Novels:*

You will narrow your focus from the overall sense of the story to individual elements. **If you have time to reread the novel, do so. It will help immensely.** If you do not have time, return to the bookmarked sections and reread those. Some may be irrelevant, but others may also be vital.

You are taken to another world in fiction, so ask yourself:

Am I transported?

Do I see, hear, feel this other world?

Can I sympathize with the people in this world?

Do I understand their wants, desires, and problems?

Or, am I left unmoved?

\*When you write down an answer, **quote directly from the novel** to support your answer

Is the novel a **Chronicle** (set in our own world) or a **Fable** (once-upon-a-time)?

If it is a **Chronicle**:

How does the writer show us reality?

Does the author focus on physical detail (landscape, food, clothing) or psychological (processes of mind, emotions, discovery of motivations)?

If it is a **Fable**:

What is the author's intent?

Is the author writing allegorically (one-to-one correspondence between our world and the fable world – like in *Animal Farm*)

If there is not allegory, is there speculation (how the world may turn out to be or ideas taken to the extreme – like in *1984*)?

If the novel is primarily realistic but contains some fantastical elements:

What phenomenon does this fantastical element represent?

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## Logic Questions to Ask Yourself

### *For Novels:*

What does the central character(s) want?

What is standing in his/her way?

What strategy does he/she take to overcome the obstacles?

Who is telling the story (what is the point of view)?

What does the author gain and lose with this point of view?

How would a different point of view change the story?

Where is the story set?

Note that human-built surroundings can give clues to the inner life of the characters – sparse or cluttered rooms, for example.

Is there a particular image repeated over and over again? It can be anything – a color, a piece of landscape, an animal, music.

Once you have the image, is it a metaphor?

If so, what does it represent?

Finally, look at the opening and closing of the novel.

How does the book begin? (with action, contemplation, conversation, etc)

What does the beginning tell you about the story?

It is a frame (does the author return to the beginning at the closing of the novel?)

In the end, is there resolution (no further event can take place)?

**Resolutions** tend to indicate that we can triumph over the world and control our existence and bring success or court disaster.

Or is there logical exhaustion (characters have reached state of infinite repetition – more events will follow, but they will all essentially be the same)?

**Logical exhaustion** shows how we are trapped and condemned to repeat the same actions over again.

Do you agree with the ending presented in the novel?

### *For Poems:*

Is there a story with beginning, middle, and end?

Does the poet make an argument?

Does the poet describe an experience? If so, is this experience physical or mental?

Does the poet describe a physical place, object, or sensation and use it to stand for some nonphysical reality?

Does the poem evoke a mood, feeling, idea, or emotion?

Look at the poem's syntax (word order) and pair verbs with their subjects. This will tell you if the poet uses natural diction or heightened, poetic form.

Look at lines and stanzas.

Does each line sound like a whole, or do they divide into halves?

Are sentences and lines identical? Do sentences run over the ends of one line and into another?

Is the line break natural or awkward?

If line and sentence length clash, it is for a reason. What has the author chosen to draw attention to and why?

Look for rhyme patterns and ask yourself why the poet used that particular pattern.

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## Rhetoric Stage Reading: So what?

Try to figure out how the text relates to you and if it has changed the way you view yourself, the world, etc.

Another good strategy is to have a reading partner (in your class or major) with whom you can sit down and discuss the text at leisure.

What does this writer want me to do?

What does this writer want me to believe?

What does this writer want me to experience?

Am I convinced that I must do and believe what the writer wants me to do and believe?

Have I experienced what the writer wants me to experience? If so, why and how?

If not, why?

### *For Novels:*

Is this book an accurate portrayal of life? Is it true?

What are people like?

Do people have destiny or free will?

Do you sympathize with the characters? Why or why not?

Do you know the author's overall "argument" in the book – what he/she wants us to believe?

Is the novel self-reflective? (i.e., does it convey truth of human condition?)

### *For Poems:*

Is there a moment of choice or change in the poem?

If there is change, does it happen *to* the poem or is there a moment of choice for the speaker?

Is there cause and effect? Do emotions or events arise for no particular reason? Or, is there causality?

What tension is present (physical and psychological, earthly and spiritual, mind and body, etc)?

In the world of the poem, does the physical lead to spiritual enlightenment, or block it?

What is the poem's subject? What is the poem about? What word or phrase seems to name the poem's core?

Where is the self? Is the poet's self in the poem? If so, what is the relationship between the self and the subject of the poem?

Do you feel sympathy (do you agree)?

Does the poem resonate with you, or is it a foreign experience? Which parts are familiar, and which parts are alien?

Bauer, Susan Wise. *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.