Easily Distracted
Culture, Politics, Academia and Other Shiny Objects

How to Read in College

Staying Afloat: Some Scattered Suggestions on Reading in College

The first thing you should know about reading in college is that it bears little or no resemblance to the sort of reading you do for pleasure, or for your own edification.

Professors assign more than you can possibly read in any normal fashion.

We know it, at least most of us do.You have to make strategic decisions about what to read and how to read it. You're reading for particular reasons: to get background on important issues, to illuminate some of the central issues in a single session of one course, to raise questions for discussion. That calls for a certain kind of smash-and-grab approach to reading.You can't afford to dilly-dally and stop to smell the lilies. You might not think that's the ideal way to learn, and I would sort of agree. But on the professiorial side of things, we feel a real obligation to cover a particular field of knowledge in the course of a semester, and we can't do it all through lectures. Nor would I personally want to talk at my students day in and day out.

So okay, if you're not going to read everything with intense precision and in gory detail, then how are yougoing to read it? What I hope to provide in the following page is a few of the Stupid Academic Tricks [tm] about reading that I've learned over the years. These aren't foolproof–they won't work for everyone. They all take a while to master, through trial and error. This ain't Cliff's Notes here.

SKIMMING FOR ARGUMENTS:

INTRODUCTIONS, CONCLUSIONS, SIGNPOSTS

The first rule, in some ways the only rule, is skim, skim, skim. But skimming is not just reading in a hurry, or reading sloppily, or reading the last line and the first line. It's actually a disciplined activity in its own right. A good skimmer has a systematic technique for finding the most information in the least amount of time.

I'm going to use Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Verso Press) in making my argument. It's a fairly clear piece of academic writing on an important subject.

Let me take you through a skim of this book, bit by bit.

In the first four pages, as an undergraduate reader in a course where the book is assigned, you should only really care about this sentence:

"The aim of this book is to offer some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory explanation of the 'anomaly' of nationalism."

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO IGNORE AND WHEN TO IGNORE IT?

HOW DO YOU KNOW TO SPOT THIS SENTENCE?

1. Experience

When you've done it enough times, you'll know when someone's going off on a tangent or exploring issues that you don't have time to deal with.

2. Context

It's often clear from the text itself when someone is making a side point or exploring an extraneous issue.

3. Objective

Why are you reading this: what is the subject of the course, the focus of the discussion? Suppose you're reading *Imagined Communities* to think about nationalism: Anderson's thoughts about the relationship of nationalism to Marxist theory, while not totally irrelevant, aren't directly germane either. If this were a class centrally concerned with Marxist theories of history, or on Marxist revolutions and their relationship to nationalism, it might be another matter.

4. Signposts

"I will argue" is a signpost–"If the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia" is not.

OKAY, I FOLLOWED THE RULES.

NOW LOOK WHAT I FOUND.

"My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. "

"To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy."

"I will be trying to argue that the creation of these aretfacts towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they become 'modular', capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees ofself-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with acorrespondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations." p. 4

Good job. But these are pretty tricky passages. Table them for a while.

MORE SIGNPOSTS: CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

At the bottom of page 5, top of page 6, you'll see:

"I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community–and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."

This is key. You'll want to understand all the component parts of this definition.

So, look for more signposts:

At the top of page 6:

"It is imagined because the members of event the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."

top of page 7

"The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind."

middle of page 7

"It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordered, hierarchical dynastic realm …nations dream of being free, and if under God, directly so."

Why are there ellipses (…) in the last passage?

Here's what I snipped out:

"Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch…

This takes too much time to unpack and it's not directly relevant to your comprehension of sovereignity: if you don't understand what he means by the term, you will have to seek comprehension in the text itself or from the dictionary; if you do understand (more or less), then this passage is a diversion. If you were reading this text in a course on the history of the Reformation (which you wouldn't be) you might need to think about it more.

More on the dictionary shortly.

bottom of page 7

"Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings."

In contrast, this is worth unpacking carefully.

*FINALLY , e.g, the end of definitions

*deep, HORIZONTAL comradeship: unpack this word, it's significant

*SUCH LIMITED IMAGININGS: may tell you something interesting about Anderson's attitude towards nationalism as he describes it

Okay, so now you've skimmed the introduction and found some key passages.

Now what?

IN THE MIDDLE: SEQUENCE OF ARGUMENTS

You don't have all day to waste on the intro. You've got to get a sense of the whole book, get to the middle of it. Here's some steps to help you skim your way into the heart of things.

1. Note the sequence of chapters by looking at their titles: what does Anderson seem to think he needs to prove his general argument?

2. Read the introduction of each of the chapters assigned, and perhaps even the ones not assigned.

3. Return to each chapter as assigned, in the sequence they appear in the book. Do exactly what I outlined for the intro: read the introduction to the chapter and look for the key argument(s) it contains. RELATE SPECIFIC ARGUMENTS BACK TO GENERAL CASE IN THE BEGINNING AND CONCLUSION OF THE BOOK.

4. Sketch out an outline of the sequence of argument in each chapter: what evidence does he muster to prove each specific point and in what order does he muster it?

EXAMPLE: CHAPTER TWO, "Cultural Roots"

pp. 9 to top of 11: well-written material about religion, sentiment, and so on, BUT it's NOT where you'll find the central ARGUMENT of this chapter.

You start to see this instead on the middle of page 11:

"…in Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness." p. 11

A bit later, on page 12:

"For present purposes, the two relevant cultural systems are the religious community and the dynastic realm ."

So you read this chapter much as you would the introduction, but this time, sketch out the sequence of argument:

I. Nationalism and national communities replace religion and religious communities.

II. Nationalism and national communities also replace the dynastic realm, the old monarchical order, around the same time.

III. This happens in Western Europe in the eighteenth century.

IV. discussion of religious community: summary of some of its features (common sacred language, criteria for membership, 'non-arbitrariness of the sign', hierarchical organization

V. reasons for decline of religious communities: exploration and expansion of Europe, demotion of sacred language in favor of vernacular

VI. discussion of dynastic realm: porous borders and vague sovereignities, expansion by warfare, dynastic marriages and particular forms of ritualized hierarchy

VII. decline of dynastic realm: "for reasons that need not concern us here", e.g., just skip the details

VIII. other fundamental changes besides decline of these two forms of social organization were necessary to make national communities possible: the idea of simultaneity and changes in consciousness or outlook

THINK ABOUT SEQUENCE AND WHAT DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

This is the hardest thing of all to grasp about both reading AND writing. Many students, when writing papers, understand that you need to clearly define an overall argument and place it up front in the paper.

But after that point, many student papers often contain a more or less random jumble of evidence which has some vague relation to the argument.

To develop an argument well, each point should lead logically and sequentially to the next. There's a transition between chapter 2 and 3 in *Imagined Communities* that provides an example of this. Anderson's discussion of print-capitalism and the way it changed the outlook of 18th Century Europeans leads logically into the next discussion, of secular national consciousness. His notion of simultaneity is critical to his argument in Chapter 3.

Outlining the sequence of argument in readings should help you grasp this–assuming the reading is well-written. This is, of course, a perilous assumption with academic writing.

WHEN TO GO FOR THE DICTIONARY,
WHEN TO PUZZLE OVER WORDS OR REFERENCES

When a term comes up with great frequency, and seems to mean a lot to the argument at hand, you must be sure you understand it. If you don't get what Anderson means by simultaneity, for example, you're clearly missing something important.

Take Anderson's use of the word allomorphism mentioned above, on page 7. It's probably not worth the time to figure this one out, since it's not directly related to the key arguments of Chapter One. So skip over it, unless you're curious.

(for the curious: it's a term from linguistics and geology for two or more forms of the same thing morphemes in the case of language, crystals in the case of geology)

FOOTNOTES

Footnotes are hugely overused in academia, but learning to read them is still an important skill, (particularly in history!)

There are five different basic kinds of footnotes:

1) Logrolling

When scholars are complimenting or acknowledging each other's work. You cite my work, I'll cite yours. Not too important unless you're trying to reconstruct the intellectual biography of the scholar you're presently reading, or trying to find work that might be comparable to the book you're looking at. Sometimes amusing when you get "Anti-Logrolling", e.g., footnotes which are there strictly to diss some other scholar.

2) Weird little stuff that distracts from the main point but which is still kind of interesting.

This is the material that didn't fit, but that the scholar couldn't bear to give up on. If you're skimming, you don't have the time to spare to look at these kinds of footnotes. If you're doing research, it may be a different matter.

3) Oh, by the way, there's one teeny tiny little exception.

This could be important, even if you're skimming. Sometimes scholars stick big, hairy problems with their argument down in the footnotes somewhere.

4) Look, Ma, I did the reading.

Scholars, especially junior scholars, need to prove to their colleagues that they know the scholarship in the field that they are working on. So many footnotes are laundry lists of relevant books, or recap bodies of theory on a particular subject. Relevant if you're researching, but not relevant if you're skimming.

5) You want proof? I'll give you proof.

Even if you are skimming, you may want to know, when you're faced with a substantive factual claim by an author, just how that person came by their facts. You'll probably have to look in the footnotes to find out. If you come across a factual assertion and you feel the need to know the source of that fact, then read the footnote–even if you're skimming.

For example, if you read Anderson's footnotes, you'll find that he often uses evidence pertaining specifically to the Dutch East Indies and French South-East Asia (present-day Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam and so on) to support general arguments. This might be valid, but you might also wonder if he isn't generalizing from too narrow a base.

When he isn't working from this body of primary evidence–which he obviously knows best–then you might want to check in the bibliography to see what secondary sources he's using about other countries. Note their date of

publication. Quite a few of these sources are older ones. Might there be a newer scholarship that would complicate matters?

It also depends on the reading. Anderson's book is a broadly comparative, generally argued book. Not that much of his book is going to need detailed references to primary material: this is a synthesizing book, an overview of many different literatures. It is different from a monograph, a tightly focused study of some specific historical subject or era. In a monograph, footnote references to evidence may be very, very important.

The Dictionary

Yes, sometimes you don't need to know what a word means, like "allomorphism" above. But if a term recurs regularly in a text, or seems particularly central, you MUST learn to pick up a dictionary and find out what the author means. Learn to keep one by your side and don't try to bluff your way past such a term. An initial mistake about the meaning of a term can rapidly multiply into a gigantic misreading if you're not careful.

TAKING NOTES AND PREPARING FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Hi-Lighter Event Horizon.

Don't use a hi-lighter. They're useless. You'll end up marking every damn thing under the sun.

2. Try writing down key arguments and making your own outline.

3. Mark things you don't understand, areas of uncertainty and so on: bring them to class.

That's the whole point, you know: you should never be afraid to talk about what you were uncertain about. Far from it.

4. Mark two or three areas of potential disagreement or debate: construct a CRITIQUE of the reading to share during discussion. CRITIQUE is not CRITICISM: Do not follow a scorched earth policy, but don't feel limited by your own particular feelings and reactions: it's good to think through a reasoned critique even when you don't necessarily agree with it.

Addendum April 27, 2006

Welcome to anyone who has found this page through the new Swarthmore College main page.

This is a relatively old page that could use a graphical sprucing-up, but I hope most of you reading it find it useful nevertheless.

There are **two caveats** I should add about the advice given here.

1) **NONE** of this advice applies if the reading you're doing for class is a work of literature, a primary document or if you're otherwise operating in a discipline where close reading is centrally important to the way the discipline thinks. You can't skim a novel or a poem. You often shouldn't skim a document that you're using as historical evidence. There are some disciplines where it can be very difficult to skim. Works in both analytic and continental philosophy, for example, often can be badly misunderstood if you skim. Different rules apply also in reading

articles or papers in the natural sciences, though to some extent writing styles in the sciences come "pre-skimmed", e.g., they're designed to communicate results and design in a compact fashion.

Broadly speaking, my advice is most useful in the social sciences and in reading many works of literary or cultural criticism.

2) **NONE** of this advice applies if you're taking a class from a professor who is extremely intent on the full completion of the reading in every particular. You always have to assess the individual quirks and peculiarities of every professor, and if you're prudent, you'll accomodate those sensibilities. A different kind of calculation enters if you're taking a class from a professor who is exceptionally exacting about what they expect you to get out of reading. Then you should look at the syllabus and ask, "Is this professor reasonable in the amount they assign in relationship to the exacting demands they place upon students?" I have taught classes where I expect much more precise and careful reading, and in those courses, I try to adjust the amount I require downward. If a demanding professor doesn't do that with reading materials, then what they're expecting is that you will proportionately invest more time on that course than on any other you are taking that semester. The issue in that case is not with how to read, but the larger art of time management and the trade-offs that come with it. At that point, what you should ask yourself is, "Do I expect to get some greater benefit out of this class that justifies the greater investment of time? Or is this class for some reason absolutely essential to my plans?" If you decide to take that course, be sure to accomodate the views of the professor on what constitutes "good work". Saying that Professor Burke says it's ok to skim isn't going to help you much when the grades come rolling in.

One Response to *How to Read in College*

David Chudzicki *says:*
February 2, 2011 at 1:54 pm

I don't know if you've seen this, but other advice on how to read a book quickly:

http://savageminds.org/2007/10/01/how-to-read-a-good-book-in-one-hour/
