

How to Take Notes from Readings

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I don't recall having read anything about how to take notes while reading. At least I can't find my notes, nor do I find much on the Web. Perhaps there is something out there I can't find. Perhaps there isn't much because note-taking seems so common sensical. But it is a critical skill, and however ordinary, it is not innate or entirely idiosyncratic. While there is no right or wrong in note taking (no general principles, no unchanging rules) it would be silly to avoid the topic on these grounds alone. So, in the absence of a Royal Road, we will perhaps be forgiven a few personal travel tips.

Marking Up Books - The first thing to admit is that most readers make notes or marks of some kind in their books. It is a longstanding practice that goes back to the beginning of writing. I know that I mark up almost all of my books. As a matter of principle, I never write in my rare or scarce books, never in books I don't own, certainly not library books. I have two reasons for making marks. First, the practice helps focus attention, and second, I mark passages in order to identify them at a later date.

More about Marking Books - Over the years I have tried to develop a 'system' of marking books and making notations. Actually, it's not a system but some consistent habits. As a rule, I usually begin by giving an important book a 'pencil reading.' In subsequent readings I sometimes use different color inks, and on rare occasions a highlighter (more on highlighters below). But what parts are important? For my part, I mark the most telling generalizations and the most telling details. I try to keep the marks simple and few. For example, only the most important text (to me, then) deserves to be underscored. (Here I confess I sometimes not only underscore but add other marks and notes). Underscoring is time consuming and messy. So I use other devices like a vertical line in the margin. If I feel particular passion for a passage I might add two or more. In the end, writing and marking books can help you become a more active, careful, critical reader. It can also be an excuse for not understanding the text, it can become a form of active avoidance that aims at painting a page. My main motive for marking books is to leave a sign for later, to give my future self a clue about what I thought was so important. The practice has led to unwittingly amusement.

Marginal Annotation - Finally, in addition to simple marks I make written annotations. Sometimes I put an elegant 'X' in the margin. I no longer write out questions (in many of my second-hand books I find this a common practice for other readers) nor do I bother (since age 21) to litter the page with exclamation marks! My youthful books contain 'a lot of exclamation marks and expletives!!!' Now I use one-word jots (a concept or whatever) or more often a name. That's about it. The 'system' works because it is simple. It allows me to thumb and find what I need or to recall the key elements of the argument, the principal forms of evidence. Some of my old marks now make little sense and often provide a moment of humor, a sense of double recognition--a flashback vision of how I once understood an author or issue. I have learned to forgive myself as a younger reader. My old marks tell me how carefully I read the book, how well I understood the argument, and, of course, what was important to me then.

All this simply underscores that marking books is personal and that there are some obvious ways to avoid a highlighter. What is most important is developing skills in analysis, evaluation, and interpretation. Marking up a book may help you become a more active, careful, and critical reader. It may help you question the author's purpose and objectives. If you think about what you are doing it can help you note and recall the key arguments and the best evidence, the big ideas and the subtle but often telling details.

Notes From Books - Finally, what about taking notes from books? If you are enrolled a University level course it is likely you take lecture notes (cf. infra). The two types of note-taking skill overlap but are not the same. If they don't use different brain functions, they certainly use different sensibilities. Lectures tend to involve larger doses of personality and style in a social or institutional setting. Books are a more personal form of confrontation.

But there are things that help bind the two note-taking activities together. If you are new to the University, chances are you need all the organizational help you can get. As a suggestion, consider combining your reading and lecture notes into one notebook. Help yourself by making the readings and the lectures work together. Given the relationship between the two major components of University life, it makes good sense to use the topical unfolding of the course over time (lectures and readings) to organize your stuff in one place.

A ring notebook will help. If your notes are bound (fixed, stapled, sewn) it is difficult to add new notes and to reorganize old ones. Your notebook should allow flexibility. Maybe you have a better idea. Computers allow maximum organizational flexibility (the text is plastic in position, relation, modification, and duplication over time, etc.) Most of the simple suggestions that follow apply to laptop or notebook computers as well as the time-honored ring notebook.

When you take lecture notes it is a good idea to put the date at the top of a fresh page along with the lecture title and outline. Same goes for readings. If you have three sets of readings for the week, start your notes on a fresh page with the author, book title, chapter(s) and pages. Then the fun begins.

How do you make sense of a chapter in a book? The first skinny is simple: Everything has a context. Your principal job is to evaluate and connect the various parts of the course into a coherent whole. The chapter fits within a book; the book relates to other required books; the books serve as a backdrop to the lectures; the lectures structure the course; this course relates to your other courses, past or present; your education.... You get the idea. So what's the course about, what are the various contexts?

The Big Skinny - The key point of note taking is that you should always be thinking about what you write. The final goal is to learn. So it is a good idea to work learning into your daily schedule. Taking notes is a ritual for thinking. It underscores the moment, it repeats the thought. Writing is one of the best support systems for learning.

But how to take notes? First, don't forget you already have the book. Don't bother copying it verbatim, don't polish your highlighting skills. Reproducing the text word for word is like using a map where the scale reads: One Mile = One Mile. You are not a photocopy machine, a tape recorder, or a Big Green Highlighting Machine. Making entire pages yellow or pink will not make them more meaningful.

Instead, your job is to read critically and to interpret. Sorry. We cannot gloss this over: The ever-present task is to get behind the words. Your main job is to uncover meaning. So, avoid all temptations to paint things over. The challenge is far more creative. As reader, your core activity is

to negotiate meaning with the author. This requires that you develop skills in reading between the author's lines, that you read closely in order to present a defensible interpretation of the text, the 'author's text.'

Once you can demonstrate these skills--that you can 'stay within the lines' and 'connect someone else's dots'--you are on your way to making 'your own pictures'. But reading critically and creatively first means you are able to understand an author's position. This usually involves presenting and defending your interpretation to a critical audience. There are several well-known dangers. First, it is easy to miss (or dismiss) the author's line of argument. Second, there is a constant urge to 'make our own pictures', that is, to stray from the text into the la-la land of free association. Don't do that.

Keeping within the 'lines of a text' is not kid's game or a 'coloring book' exercise. It requires mature effort and discipline. One of the most common activities at any University is going 'outside the lines of the text'. We go outside the lines for any number of reasons, more often than not at some peril. In classrooms and seminar discussion, straying from the text is usually the result of haste, exuberance, or lack of discipline. Missing or dismissing the text is usually driven by a wish to draw our own pictures. More creative, right? Not necessarily.

Make no mistake. Developing critical and creative skills in reading texts, that is, in drawing sound conclusions and defensible interpretations from an author, is a highly creative enterprise. To be sure, it involves shared skills with 'making your own pictures', equally clear, the two activities are easily distinguished. If you are unclear about the line between the two activities, there is a simple test. Try imposing your interpretation on others. Universities have long-standing traditions that test this line. A standard practice is to focus on the 'close reading' of shared texts. The line in question, of course, marks the difference between you and everything else. It is a critical line, like it or not, and Universities are designed to help you negotiate it. Happily, it keeps moving. We call this education. Properly pursued, it is designed to call you into question. When it works, we get interesting answers. At its best, we ask new questions. So, if you have reason to be out of line, by all means, show us.

If discipline and imitation guide your apprenticeship, the goal is to develop critical and creative skills all your own. Once mastered, skills in analysis and interpretation provide tools for developing your own perspective and style. But in the end, the value of your work depends on market principles. The first test is: Are your interpretations of a given text clear, organized, well-supported, and creative? Above all, can you defend your views? Are your 'readings' of a text accepted, acknowledged, perhaps even admired? Maybe not. Chances are you will always have critics. To sharpen your skills, consider the following questions.

What does the author mean? This, alas, is not always clear. But there are clear questions to ask. What are the author's assumptions? What is her main point in the book? How is the work organized? How do the parts relate? Day by day, lecture by lecture, page by page, your main job is to think about what all this means. To do this, ask yourself questions. Take the readings and lectures 'apart' and put them together again. The words need to be digested before the meaning is yours.

In the end, you will have to communicate and defend a position you call your own. To find a position worth defending you need to find questions worth considering. Once you have good questions you can begin to formulate good answers. And remember, reading and writing are related. Readers always ask questions that writers want to anticipate. As a guide to critical reading, note-taking, and good writing, consider the following questions. I call them the 'mantra.' The mantra is worth repeating until you are one. It goes like this:

1. Thesis Statement - What is the author's Thesis? The thesis is the main interpretive claim an author makes about her subject. The thesis statement often comes in the first paragraph. But not always. Weak writers have a weak or non-existent Thesis Statement. That's bad. But you as reader are well advised to train yourself to find the Thesis Statement or become very clever in constructing them. (One of the curiosities of reading and writing and researching is that first-time readers are sometimes better equipped to provide a clear thesis than long-time authors. Writers are often 'too close' to see clearly.) In any case, looking for the Thesis will help you read more critically and actively. Once you have one or two candidates (usually somewhere in the first several paragraphs) ask yourself: What does this mean? What does it assume? How does it fit with earlier chapters? How does it

compare with the other readings? With the lectures? How does all this fit in the course?

2. Objectives - What are the author's objectives? The author's objectives for the chapter should be stated somewhere in the first few paragraphs. The objectives are sometimes difficult to separate from the Thesis Statement. The objectives generally relate to the author's hopes about covering territory, that is, covering various issues and topics or a certain patch of material (over time, space, theme). Usually the author's objectives are less interpretative than the Thesis Statement. As a rule, the Objectives of a book, chapter, or essay link the Thesis Statement and the third category: Structure and Evidence.

3. Structure - Plan - Map - What is the structure? If you wish to travel across country by car it is usually a good idea to look at a map. Reading and writing are similar. When you read a book begin by taking time to consume it from the outside in. Read the blurb on the back cover or digest the dust jacket. What's the selling point? Where is Billy-Bo-Bob (the bookstore clerk) supposed to shelve this sucker? What are the author's grandest hopes for the book and the imagined audience? Now move to the Table of Contents. What are the chapter titles? Why those titles? More difficult: Why this arrangement? Why are some things included and others not? How is the book organized: Chronologically? Topically? Thematically? According to some method or approach? The same questions apply to all sub-structures, from books to chapters to chapter subheadings: Why these divisions? Why these parts? Why this relation of parts?

The structure of the chapter (like the structure of the book and the course) tells you a great deal about how the Thesis and Objectives link up with the Argument and Evidence. Arguably, the structure is the lynch pin, it provides the glue that holds the entire project together. A good exercise is to ask how you might re-organize the book. Can you imagine a better structure? Have some fun, be creative but critical: How could this book be made more effective? Cut a superfluous chapter? Combine two chapters? Add a needed chapter? Shift the position of chapters two and five? Re-write the introduction? Make better transitions between the chapters? You get the idea. If you find yourself struggling to make good sense of a bad book, take heart. Your time is not entirely wasted. One possible pleasure is knowing that the author probably struggled too—even if there is little evidence of such a struggle. Curiously, well-written books show little sign of struggle. But good or bad, you have a job to do. You can learn from all kinds of books, even bad books. You do this

by establishing clear criteria, by asking critical questions, and by continually 'arranging yourself' (Diane Arbus) rather than lamenting your plight.

To be sure, the author of a book has certain obligations too. In taking you on a journey, she should be careful to provide a map and alert you to various signs. There should be no question about the reasons for the trip (Thesis), the territory to be traversed (Objectives). There should be other clear signs, among them, repeated efforts to gain your confidence (Argument & Evidence) to ensure you are satisfied when you finally arrive (promises are kept and expectations are met).

The structure of the book and the organization of each chapter provide road maps and various informational and warning signs. Your job is to balance your skepticism with a willingness to see the world from this particular vehicle through these particular windows. Do you feel safe? How's view? Is the pace too slow? Or are things a little breezy? Perhaps your knuckles are turning white or you need to make an important rest stop. Some trust is required. If you decide to take the trip constantly ask yourself where you are going. Don't stop evaluating the itinerary, the sights, the signs, or the driver. For comfort: Find the map. Read the signs. Ask questions.

4. Argument & Evidence - What support is there for the thesis, the objectives, and the form of presentation? In a sense the argument and evidence justify the trip, particularly route taken. If its a dangerous trip there should be unusually good reasons for going. If it is a well-traveled road you won't hear anything new nor is there much justification-- unless, of course, it is a ordinary trip with extraordinary Guide. Seeing familiar things afresh can be exhilarating. There is no reason for a dull book. This is not to say there is no need for travel brochures or tourist guides. But a serious book should have something serious to say. But don't confuse 'not amusing' with boring or insignificant. The author may insist on showing things you don't want to see, there may be points of interest that are unpleasant but demand attention. Parts may be trying and difficult. The value of the trip is what matters. If you take me to Newton, Nebraska I want to know why; if you ask me to get in a ramshackle bus and you drive too fast, I want to know everything will be all right. Boring or risky, the reward should be in fair proportion. As you travel, keep an eye on the evidence. What is persuasive? Why? Are you being driven along by dramatic nonsense? Resting secure with

a 'canned tour'? Numbed by deadly detail? What kinds of sources are cited? Are you skimming across a narrative a thousand miles wide and an inch deep? Is it deliciously deep but mercilessly muddy? Lucid but icy? Brilliant but brittle? You get the idea.

Finally, ask: How does this chapter fit within this book? How does it connect with other books in the course? Does it conform, confirm, contradict what your Instructor claims in lecture? Is your Instructor a silly person? How do you know? If there are differences of emphasis and interpretation, how are the approaches and conclusions supported? Which positions are more satisfying, relevant, and appropriate? What kinds of evidence are there to support the claims? More to the point, what are your criteria in choosing one position over another?

At the end of the day, how would you defend your view of the book? Now it's time to be tough on yourself. You can take it. Learn to be persistent in asking yourself what you believe and why you think your position is defensible. Politely inquire of yourself (and others) 'How do you know that?' Find answers that satisfy you (at least for now) and be inquisitive about the questions themselves, particularly the assumptions and motives that drive them. And keep encouraged.