

How to Read for Grad School

By Miriam E. Sweeney

In graduate school, the work load increases and students will find that they are expected to master two to three times the material that they were used to as an undergraduate. This can be intimidating to the point of overwhelming a student into paralysis. Following these tips should help you master your readings instead of allowing the readings to master you!

1. Read Strategically, Not Linearly.

Reading for graduate school is different than reading a book for pleasure. When we read for pleasure we often start at the beginning of the book, reading carefully in a linear fashion. If you do this with your academic material, it will take twice as long and it is likely you won't retain the right kind of information from the reading. *Instead of reading linearly, read strategically.* As an academic reader your job is to mine the text you are reading for information. Instead of cruising along the narrative, you need to dive in, find the information you need, and move along to the next stack of readings for class.

If you are reading a book this means you should look over the table of contents, then read the entire introduction carefully. In academic books, the introduction is where the author states all of their main points, the framework they will use, and an outline of what information will be covered in each chapter. Next, look over the last chapter. This is the conclusion, which will restate the main arguments of the author and will often contextualize these arguments in a broader context, suggest next steps, or speculate solutions or alternatives. From here you can go to the parts of the book you want deeper knowledge about. Individual chapters will be laid out similarly to the book structure with an introduction, and middle and the conclusion. Skimming the beginning and end of the chapter will give you the main points, then you can gather evidence by browsing the middle parts of the chapter. *Remember, you are not really expected to read every single word of the book; your mandate is to understand the author's main ideas, arguments, and be able to articulate why this discussion matters.*

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If you are reading a journal article, start by checking the name of the journal that published the article. This will key you in to the scope and boundaries that the article is working within. Next, carefully read the title and the abstract of the piece. A good abstract should clearly explain the main argument of the article, the kind of evidence the author uses, and a succinct conclusion, or what the author found out. Armed with this information, look over the introduction to see how the author is framing their work, paying attention to the citations they use. This tells you who the author is trying to be in dialogue with. Next, flip to the discussion section. Sometimes this is separate than the conclusion, sometimes not, depending on the disciplinary standards of the author and journal. Read the discussion and conclusion carefully. These sections will explain the author's main arguments and the "why you should care" piece. Now you can go back through the article armed with the knowledge of where the author is leading you and browse over methods and results sections. Pay attention particularly to images and data visualizations. Note how these things relate to or support the discussion and conclusion sections you read.

Reading strategically instead of linearly will make you a more efficient and effective academic reader. Getting familiar with how different formats of writing are structured will give you the confidence and control to find the information you need in them more efficiently.

2. Take Notes!

As you are reading strategically, you absolutely must take notes simultaneously. Otherwise it is guaranteed you will not remember the kinds of details you need to recall in class, in your paper, in your own research down the road. Develop a system of your own whether it is sticking a post-it note in the book and jotting something down, or opening up RefWorks or Zotero, or Word and throwing some notes down as you read. Whatever you do, remember that future you will have NO IDEA what present you is thinking, no matter how brilliant a thought it is. *Be specific, include detailed citations and pages numbers for direct quotes so you don't have to chase them later.* If you are reading as preparation for a class, make sure you are also jotting down 3-5 questions, observations, or provocations that you can use in class for participation. In grad school, everyone is expected to participate on a high level, so have something to say ahead of time to avoid the high-blood pressure that comes from your professor's cold, hard stare.

3. Be purposeful.

Being purposeful in your readings means that as you are moving strategically through the text you are also being deliberate about what you want to glean from the reading, what are meant to glean, and how this fits with the other readings and conversations you have had in class, along with your own life experiences. *Ask yourself, “What is the author trying to say? What is motivating her exploration of this topic? What does this research contribute? What academic conversations is the author trying to align with? What are the main arguments of this piece? How does this relate to my other assigned readings?”* Going in with these questions in mind will focus you as you read and aid you in pulling out the most relevant information.

4. Apply a Critical Perspective.

Lastly, applying a critical perspective in your reading is helpful for situating a reading in broader contexts. Contrary to how it sounds, being critical does not simply mean being negative or criticizing wantonly. *Critical perspectives are those that trace and name flows of power: Who has power and who does not? Who benefits from particular social arrangements, and whom do they marginalize? Critical perspectives also question assumptions and values that are implicit in arguments: What values are underlying this work? What experiences and perspectives do these values privilege? How might centering different values or experiences re-frame the argument or conversation?* Asking questions like this will help you have deeper conversations about your readings, and really, isn't that the whole point of graduate school?

Time to make your reading work for you—good luck!



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