Course Warmup: Reading Well

Reading well often involves the following:

- Pre-reading
- Using textual clues
- Annotating
- Reviewing

This may seem like a lot of work, and initially it might take more time. But as you get good at these skills, they will save you time; they will prevent the need to re-read again and again. Let’s look at them more closely.

Pre-reading is simple. When you sit down with a text, take a few minutes and leaf through the chapter you are about to read. As you do this, look for textual clues: section headings, italics or bold print, items in bullets. Read the introduction, briefly skim the topic sentences, and read the conclusion. This will help you know what to expect and will actually increase comprehension and decrease reading time.

While pre-reading you have begun to use the textual clues, but as you read more closely, you need to look for words or phrases that indicate where the main ideas lie in a text. Often phrases like “in short,” “for example,” or “in other words” are clues that something important is being said. As you read you will find others.

These textual clues are also important in helping you know what to annotate. Some people have elaborate systems of annotation, but I have found that the most simple is often the best, if for no other reason than that you will use it. I simply read with a pencil; and as I read, I underline key words, names, concepts, definitions. It is important, however, not to underline too much. If you underline the majority of the text, your underlining is no longer helpful.

I also write notes to myself in the margins; sometimes it will
be simply “thesis” or “stasis defined.” These notes help me quickly turn to the main thesis of an article or find the definition of a term I didn’t understand like “stasis.” Other times I will write questions in the margins. Often these questions are questions I hope are answered later or disagreements I have with the text. The point is to start reading with a pencil and your system will evolve; in fact it is an infectious habit and you may find it hard to read without it.

All of the above techniques will help you review; if you have done the previous things well reviewing will be the easiest part. To review, you simply need to thumb back through the chapter you have read, and much like you did in pre-reading, look for the textual clues that will remind you of what you have just read, yet now you have made useful annotations as an aid.

Believe it or not all of this will save time in the long run while improving your comprehension and recall. Furthermore, especially for this class, these steps are important. For the first part of this class you will read about some important theoretical ideas without the help of a teacher. These ideas are an important foundation for the rest of the class and your success in the rest of the class will depend greatly on how well you understand these ideas. So read carefully and well and when the face-to-face part of this class begins, you will be prepared.

Answer questions | Next module