

Yale Department of English



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English 114 Guide

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Reading Strategies

This guide offers practical strategies and approaches to help you read scholarly texts.



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A Guide for Reading Scholarly Texts

In English 114 and other courses at Yale, you will discover new texts and conversations that are challenging to read and understand. This guide identifies some of the difficulties you might encounter and offers practical tools and approaches for tackling the readings in Writing Seminars and to support your reading beyond English 114. Although some texts might feel dense, sticking with them (and developing strategies with which to unpack particularly difficult sections) is essential: persevering in your encounters with difficult readings will enrich your contributions to class discussions and your written arguments, and will be a practice that you continue to hone throughout your university career. It is one that is intimately connected to writing.



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Strategies for Reading

Use Dictionaries, Search Tools, and Subject Guides

Regardless of the discipline, academic arguments respond to ongoing conversations about a given topic. Some writers assume that their readers will be other scholars who are already familiar with the specialized or technical language of their field, the history of ideas within that conversation, and the cultural and/or historical context(s) for the argument. As someone new to these discussions, it is understandable that you will be challenged finding your way in.

You will likely need **to consult dictionaries and encyclopedias (and perhaps do a fair amount of Googling)** more frequently than you did in high school. This is an essential part of being a university student; reference books and sites like Google and [JSTOR](#) can be immensely helpful when you need to clarify a concept, check your understanding of a text, or familiarize yourself with the basics of a new topic or field. This is particularly relevant in a class like English 114, in which you will read texts from different disciplines.

Reading and writing are intimately connected. Good readers and good writers know the value of re-reading a text.



Read Texts More than Once

Some readings are difficult to understand because the argument is theoretical or counterintuitive, meaning that the argument goes against common-sense expectations or understandings of the world. This is not necessarily meant to prevent you from understanding their ideas, but rather to create productive tension and raise new questions that force deeper engagement with the writer's ideas. As we wonder, "What in the world does that mean?" we are forced to return and **re-examine** what we just read. This can feel frustrating at first, but often results in a better understanding (and retention) of the text than the one we achieve on first reading.

Expert readers are not necessarily speed readers. Although in some cases it can be useful to read a text quickly to capture the gist of an argument, the expectation in English 114 is that you will need to read most assigned texts carefully, slowly, and more than once. This is especially true for the readings upon which your essay assignments are based. It is a good idea to pay attention to the conditions that allow you to do your best work and to set aside specific times during the day that will allow you to give optimal focus to your readings. With persistence, you will notice that your efforts will pay off.

Pay Attention to Examples, Illustrations, and Structure

Concrete examples and illustrations can help you make sense of highly theoretical arguments. Search these out in your readings, analyze them, and consider how these details might help you unpack other places in the argument that seem puzzling. You should also pay attention to the structure of the argument. Even if you have trouble grasping what the writer is saying, you can still note how the writer organizes their ideas. By observing how these different elements work within the text, you might be able to use your understanding to uncover the more mystifying aspects of the argument.

Read Texts Together

Struggling to read and learning to write about higher-level prose comes with the territory of writing well at the college level. Another key college survival strategy (and general good practice as you move through the world) is working together as a group: you will do this in class but doing it outside of class can be hugely helpful, too. You will discover that your classmates have valuable insights, experiences, and methods that will enhance your own experience and understanding of course readings.

Set Aside your Objections (for a while)¹

Having strong objections to a writer's argument can prove to be an obstacle sometimes. Strong reactions are not bad in themselves; they suggest that you care deeply about a topic and the writer's position. Still, you want to make sure that you can evaluate the argument on its own terms. It would be a good idea then, to set aside those objections for a while and to try to understand what the writer is arguing and why. Are their reasons good? Do they provide adequate evidence in support of their reasons? This will help you shift your focus from making a judgement of taste, in which you declare that you do not like the text, to an analysis of the workings of the argument. This does not mean that your own feelings are irrelevant, but when you do offer a critique after first inhabiting the writer's view and the basis for their argument, you might discover more profound reasons to challenge their ideas or their approach to the questions they seek to answer.

Annotate the Texts

When you *annotate* or write notes for yourself in the margins of the text, you put yourself in dialogue with the writer's ideas. This form of active reading is the foundation for the analytical thinking you will need to perform in English 114. **See the ENGL 114 Guide "Close Reading for Argument."**

You might be used to marking up what you consider to be important points in an essay. Go one step further and try to identify what the writer is *doing*. Do not highlight aimlessly. If you are struck by something the writer says, write down *why* in the margins. This is your chance to reflect on and challenge the meanings of what you read; record your questions and objections. Draw comparisons and comment on discrepancies. Take note of the structure of the argument. You also may choose to rearticulate or summarize an idea or argument to clarify it. Annotating helps you to remember and internalize the material you read. It also encourages you to reflect on the text, and come up with your own ideas, perhaps for future essays.

¹ Peter Elbow calls this the believing (and doubting) game. See Peter Elbow, *Writing without Teachers*, New York: Oxford, UP, 1973.

Strategies

1. Use dictionaries and search tools
 2. Re-read texts
 3. Examine illustrations, examples, and structure of the argument
 4. Read texts together
 5. Set aside your objections (for a while)
 6. Annotate the texts
 7. Be patient with yourself and keep practicing
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Trust Yourself and Trust Your Curiosity and Confusion

You know and understand more than you think you do. Do not be afraid of asking questions or uttering the sentences “I don't know...” and “I don't understand...” in class. If your instructors expected you to have everything fully figured out before class, there would be no point in discussing anything as a group. Similarly, if you could figure out everything there is to know about the reading on your own, there would be no point in coming to class. Giving your best attempt as an answer, or answering with a thought that is not fully formed, are perfectly reasonable responses to any question that is asked in class. Asking a question yourself is never a bad idea since, more often than not, other people might be wondering about the same thing. Each of your perspectives is unique. Offering a comment or reflection— including questions—is generous and valuable, and your professors are eager to see you contribute to class in this way.

A Final Thought: Patience and Practice

Courses designed to develop your writing and critical thinking skills will also change how you read and how you take notes. This is hard work and requires practice. The only way to get better at both critical reading and writing is to keep practicing and applying techniques until they become second nature. This course offers you the chance to do that by exposing you to different types of academic prose and by asking you to write papers where you can apply the readings and techniques discussed in your classes. Be patient, but demanding, with yourselves: your reading and writing muscles will continue to develop, and strengthening your reading practice will help you become a better writer, and a better interlocutor.

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