READING DIFFICULT SCHOLARLY SOURCES:

WHY ARE SCHOLARLY SOURCES SO HARD TO UNDERSTAND

Chances are good that you are not the primary audience for this author’s text. S/he is probably aiming the work toward a scholarly or academic audience. Don’t despair! You’ll still be able to work with the text, but you should expect to experience two different issues:

1. The author will assume prior knowledge that you likely don’t have.
   a. It’s okay not to understand some vocabulary and references to other works!
   b. Hold off looking too many things up the first time you skim an article.

2. The writing might not be appealing to you.
   a. The author’s goal is not to “hook” you. Don’t worry. Consider the reading in the context of your course and assignment. BE STRATEGIC. Don’t read this with your feet up for pleasure. Reading these types of articles is REAL WORK.

BEFORE YOU SCAN or READ THE TEXT

In order to effectively respond to a text (in an essay, research paper, or exam), you must perform rhetorical reading; that is, you must think beyond the boundaries of the particular reading to consider the relationship between the writer, you, and the context of the class in which it was assigned. Consider the following before you scan the text to set up reading goals or questions. This way you will make the most of your reading time and will remain motivated as you read this difficult text.

| CONSIDER YOUR COURSE. CONSIDER THE ASSIGNMENT: REVIEW YOUR COURSE MATERIALS (NOTES, ASSIGNMENT SHEETS, HANDOUTS) BEFORE YOU READ | ✓ Why is my professor asking me to read this piece? Are there clues in the syllabus? On the assignment sheet? In my professor’s comments in class? ✓ Why does my professor want me to focus on this specific text? ✓ How does this text relate to the course content? Other reading? |
| ✓ ✓ ✓ |
| CONSIDER THE TEXT. | ✓ ✓ ✓ |
| ✓ What is this text (newspaper article, blog entry, editorial, scholarly article, book, etc.)? Think about how each of these is organized differently to scan effectively. ✓ What is the goal of the text? |
| CONSIDER THE WRITER’S PURPOSE. | ✓ ✓ ✓ |
| ✓ What are the writer’s motivations? What is her/his agenda? ✓ How do the writer’s choices reflect her/his motivations or purpose? |

READ PIECE BY PIECE: SCAN FIRST TO ORIENT YOU TO THE TEXT

READING DIFFICULT SCHOLARLY SOURCES:

Now scan to develop MORE focused reading questions OR preliminary answers to some of the questions you have already developed. Explore each of the following components in the following order. This strategy will allow you to better comprehend and be able to respond to the text in an efficient manner.

1. THE TITLE

Some academic disciplines use a standard format for titles, long titles separated by colons. See the example below:

“Garbage cans and metal pipes: Bolshevist music and the politics of proletarian propaganda”

Here's another example. If you’re reading about the Russian Revolution, and you know that you want to focus on music's role during the Revolution. You might find the following article title. What can you glean from the title before you look at anything else?

“'Like the beating of my heart': A discourse analysis of Muscovite musicians' letters during the Russian Revolution”

Questions I can derive from this title and use to guide my reading:

- What is a discourse analysis? How does this methodology allow the author to draw conclusions about musicians’ letters?
- Who are the Muscovites? Have we talked about them in class? Did they appear in course readings?
- What might the author's discourse analysis help us better understand about music during the Russian Revolution? Why might this understanding be important?

2. THE ABSTRACT

What is an abstract? Many academic articles have abstracts that appear at the beginning of the article. Think of abstracts as executive summaries. Abstracts usually appear in database searches, so you can use an article's abstract to decide whether or not you want to use the full article. Abstracts generally approach the following topics:

- The main problem or question addressed in the article
- The approach the author takes
- The new thing that the article does
- Why people already invested in this field should care
  Why do academics find this article important?

Warning about abstracts: Abstracts often contain specialized jargon. However, the abstracts are good places to re-read, highlight, underline, and look up what you don’t understand. By better understanding the abstract, you'll have a better grasp on the article’s text.

Questions I can derive from an abstract and use to guide my reading:

- What are the most important terms from this abstract? What do the terms mean?

READING DIFFICULT SCHOLARLY SOURCES:

- From which data, previous studies, or papers is the author drawing?
- Does the author reach a conclusion in the paper? If so, what is the conclusion?
- What seems to be the author's argument?
- Based on the abstract, how do you think this paper will be organized?

3. THE INTRODUCTION
How can an introduction help? Well-written introductions can do the following:
- Summarize the whole article
- Present the main idea
- Explain why the reader should care
- Offer a road map for the rest of the article

Warning about introductions: Sometimes introductions are not labeled as such. Generally, treat the first section of an article as the introduction, regardless if it is explicitly called that or not.

Questions I can derive from an introduction and use to guide my reading:
- Is the argument different than I expected?
- Why does the author think this article/study/report is relevant to readers?
- Do any surprising or unexpected points arise in the introduction? How will they affect the writer's conclusions?

4. SECTION HEADINGS
How can section headings help? Section headings are titles for particular parts of the article. Read them before you read the rest of the article so that you understand its trajectory. Understanding the article's trajectory will help you understand its argument.

Questions I can derive from section headings and use to guide my reading:
- Based on what I know about the author's argument, why would the author organize the paper this way?
- Which section headings look most interesting or relevant to my purposes? Why?
- Are there any graphs or figures? What information do these figures contain? How does the visual information relate to the author's argument?

5. CONCLUSION

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The conclusion often contains clues that help you understand the article. Authors might do the following in the conclusion:
- Re-phrase their arguments more clearly
- Indicate limitations of their work
- Suggest unanswered questions
- Suggest future research questions

Questions I can derive from a conclusion and use to guide my reading:
- Is the conclusion labeled as such? If not, what is the last section named? How does the name (ex., "Plan for Action," “Discussion," “Implications," etc.) reflect the content? How does the name reflect the author’s argument?
- Are limitations mentioned in the conclusion? Are the limitations surprising? Why or why not?

7. STOP: WHAT IS THE ARTICLE’S MAIN ARGUMENT OR IDEA?
After exploring the previously listed components, you should be able to effectively determine why the article was written and how the author attempts to achieve that purpose.

NOW READ EFFICIENTLY AND TAKE NOTES EFFECTIVELY

Now you will be able to read more quickly, make wiser decisions about what words to stop and look up, and effectively frame questions or concerns for class discussion or for meetings with your professor for clarification if necessary. After you have read the article, return to the questions you answered before you read the text. How have your answers changed? In what ways are they more specific? How has your perception of the text changed? Include this information with any notes you make on the text information.