

HANDY-DANDY GUIDE TO READING CRITICALLY

1. **Survey:** First, survey--or “preview”--the material you’re going to read. If it’s a book, look at the table of contents, scan the introduction and/or preface, and flip through the chapters. If it’s a chapter or article, look at the title, the chapter headings, and the graphics (if there are any). Taking 3-5 minutes to survey or preview a book, or 1-3 minutes to survey a chapter, will save you a lot of time, because it will give you an idea of what’s coming. Therefore, you can read knowledgeably.
2. **Look for the Thesis and Main Ideas:** Because most good writers introduce their main ideas in their first paragraphs and many sum up their ideas in their last paragraphs, your second step should be to read the introduction to the book or the chapter/article. Then, read the first and last paragraph of every section. If you do that, you’ll probably have a good grasp of the thesis and supporting ideas. This is also a great way to review material quickly before class.
3. **Read actively:** When you’re ready to read the whole piece through, read actively. Try using the “SQ3R” method: “survey”; “question”; “read”; “recite”; “review.”
 - **Survey:** see step 1.
 - **Question:** try posing questions about the title and chapter headings—preferably “w” questions (“who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” “why,” “how” . . .) For example, if you were to read an article titled “Dudley Square: The Making of a Community,” you might ask, “Where is Dudley Square?” “Who made it a ‘community’?” “When?” “In what ways wasn’t it a ‘community’ before?” “What makes it a ‘community’ now?” “How did people go about making it a community?” and so forth. If you have time, write down your questions.
 - **Read:** now, read the piece one section at a time. While you read, keep your questions in mind and read actively, to find answers to them.
 - **Recite:** after you finish each section, briefly recite to yourself what the section was about. If you can’t, you need to re-read. Reciting confirms that you understood what you read and helps you remember it. If you have time, write answers to the questions.
 - **Review:** after you finish the piece, review your questions and answers. If you haven’t written them down, this would be an excellent time to take notes. You might even consider making a “cluster” or “web” of the material (put the thesis statement in the center and “cluster” the main ideas around it).
4. **Analyze:** Now that you’re in college, it’s time to go beyond “the basics” of understanding the content of what you read—we want you to critique it. Try to figure out why your professor assigned this material—what do you think he or she wanted you to get out of it? For example: Was the author convincing? Are his/her sources credible? Does he/she leave out or under-privilege anything important? Does she/he overemphasize anything? What’s the author’s “come from place” and how do you know? What in the piece was valuable to you? What was questionable? What questions still remain for you about the topic? Or, what questions did the reading raise for you? Did you like the piece? If so, why? If not, why not? Does the piece remind you of other pieces you’ve read? How is it similar to and different from them? And so on . . .