

How to Read, Comprehend, Analyze, and Assess a College Reading Assignment

I. The Reading Process

1. Create an optimal environment for concentrated, productive reading.
2. Read assignments well in advance. Ideally, you will read important and difficult assignments multiple times. Also, read with the writing assignment in mind. Different types of assignments require different types of reading.
3. Use highlighting, underlining, and margin notes to keep track of main and critical ideas and information and to indicate questions and comments.
4. For pieces on which you will be producing significant writing, create an on-going outline of reading while you are reading.
5. Write down all ideas, brainstorm, questions, etc. as soon as they come to you, especially right after completing reading. You may think you'll remember all of your thoughts when it comes time to write, but you won't.
6. Compare your understanding of the main ideas with your peers to make sure you've gotten the big picture of the reading. If you haven't, contact the professor as soon as possible.

II. Comprehension

1. Use highlighting, underlining, and margin notes effectively. You should be noting theses, central arguments, and critical evidence. Too much notation will not serve you well; it will only confuse you.
2. Remember that you need to be able to understand the gist of reading enough to complete the assignment. That will not always require you to understand everything completely. Effective gleaning is an important skill, especially since you will have more reading than you will ever be able to complete. The key is to have the skills to figure out what's essential to read and to have strong control of that material.
3. Make sure that you understand all critical vocabulary. If you do not understand key words that are repeated throughout the article, look them up or ask an expert. You can get away with not understanding every word in a piece (although noting and learning these words will help you in the long run), but you must have mastery of the main verbiage.
4. Rewrite main ideas and/or the article outline in your own words. If you can restate the essential points and explain the main arguments and evidence in your own way, then that is a sign that you really get the piece of reading.
5. Use guide questions offered by text or professor to gauge comprehension. If none are given, create your own and answer them. If you cannot create your own appropriate questions, then that probably means you don't really understand the reading.

III. Analysis and Assessment

1. Use your notes and outline to identify the main thesis, subtheses, and critical evidence.
2. Try to create a short-version map of the piece's logic or layout.
3. Evaluate the reading from various angles, including:
 - strengths and weaknesses of main thesis / idea
 - strengths and weaknesses of supporting theses / ideas
 - strengths and weaknesses of evidence and examples
 - strengths and weaknesses of logic / layout / organization
 - strengths and weaknesses of writing (grammar, style, readability)
 - relevance, interest, engagement of reader, importance of argument
4. Make lists or charts of the above, and use that material as the skeleton of your written response.
5. Balance objective analysis and subjective opinion. Even if you do not enjoy or agree with a piece, you need to be able to evaluate its presentation and strength in an objective way. Leave your own opinion on a topic to your conclusion (unless the assignment specifies otherwise), where it is most appropriate to express personal opinions on the topic or argument itself.