

THE CENTER FOR THEOLOGICAL WRITING
DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

HOW TO READ

All of us have been asked at one time or another when we learned to read, and probably all of us have a ready answer—when I was five, six, or whenever. And yet, our responses are misleading as they suggest that “learning to read” is a one-time event that allows us to decipher the meaning of printed words.

“Reading” comes in all shapes and sizes. Reading a time-table is different from reading a poem; reading a poem is different from reading a novel; and reading a novel is different from reading philosophy or theology. Genre matters and it affects how we read. Time-tables we can scan, looking for blocks of relevant information; novels—at least popular novels—usually have narratives that carry us along in an easy and enjoyable manner; but non-fiction prose demands a different form of engagement, at least, a different form of engagement if we are to retain facts and understand a book’s complex argument. If we read Saint Paul as we would read Stephen King, or Plato as if he were Terry McMillan, then we have a problem!

To make the most of Divinity School—to engage in the kind of intellectual and spiritual formation that a seminary education entails—you have to learn to read so as to internalize as well as interpret the set texts. You also have to do this while facing the fact that time is limited and the number of pages you have been assigned seems endless.

TIME

Understanding what you are reading takes **time**, and to make the most of your time you need to have **organization** and **discipline**.

- look at your weekly reading assignments
 - assess their level of difficulty
 - decide which can be read relatively quickly and which need close reading
- draw up a time budget
- read everyday
- find a place to read free from distraction

Think of reading as a prayerful activity. Put aside daily distractions and focus.

TYPES OF TEXTS

How do you decide what can be read relatively quickly and what needs a closer reading? Until you are more familiar with your class materials, it is hard to decide. So, to begin with, rely on the wisdom of your professors. When a professor draws attention to a particular passage in a lecture, be sure to note it and go back and read that section carefully. Also, do not be afraid to ask your professor about the readings. Which are the more difficult? Which should you devote more time to?

In order to become a more critical reader, pay attention (as mentioned above) to the type of text you are dealing with. Is it a text book? A primary biblical or theological source? A historical survey or monograph? An abstract theological argument? You should avail yourself of two sources of “hints” about what kind of texts these are: your syllabus and the beginning of the books themselves (table of contents, preface, introduction, etc.).

Then, be aware of how the material is presented: look over the structure of the text. How are the primary arguments presented? Are there major sections with summaries? A glance at the index can tell you which topics are covered in greatest detail and are thus more important to the author.

NOTE TAKING

Just as you have to be a savvy reader, take care when taking notes. Obviously, your note taking will go faster the less you write. Some students err by trying to reproduce entire articles in their own writing. If this sounds like you, you can resist compulsive note-taking by waiting until the end of a chapter or section to write up a (brief) summary. This will force you to remember what you’ve read and begin to analyze it.

You can also err on the side of taking too few notes. You can’t rely on your memory alone—you will have too much information to retain to make this feasible.

The most blatant example is not writing down important information is when you fail to note the source of the notes themselves. It is very annoying to have an excellent quotation but to have no idea of its authorship! Start your notes with full bibliographic information. Get in the habit of getting it right the first time. If you photocopy an article, copy the title page and add the date. Many journals now include full information on the first page of an article, but not necessarily in your format. Also, consider using EndNote to keep track of citations. Information can be found on the Duke Divinity Library webpages.

Additionally, be sure that you write down enough that you can later understand the shape of a particular argument.

Obviously, you want to avoid plagiarism, but there is also a danger of misinterpretation. Be sure to get the line of argument right and not just record simple statements. Don't just write, "Prof. X supports euthanasia," but include how she supports it, the counterarguments involved, and the most important supportive statements. Be careful not to miss qualifying statements such as "often," "sometimes," etc. And be very careful when the book you're reading summarizes another author's argument – don't confuse whose opinion is whose.

Distinguish in your notes between direct quotations, paraphrases, and your own thoughts about the reading. You might come up with a system of notation to distinguish these kinds of notes (such as putting quotation marks around everything that is in the author's words, leaving your paraphrases as plain text, and placing your thoughts about the text in boxes or underlining them). And don't forget to write down the page numbers for each thing you record so you can cite things accurately.

If you are taking notes in books you own, avoid the temptation merely to highlight. It doesn't translate well into thought. Try to write very short summaries in the margins. You can also create your own index by writing down page numbers of key terms, themes, or points. Keep a running "cast of characters" (this is especially important for long historical works!).