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Active Reading Skills

Reading well for political theory (and really, any analytical reading) is active reading. *Active reading* is engagement with the text – passing a highlighter, a cursor, a stylus, or a pen/pencil over words can easily become a gesture associated with seeing the words on the page and disassociated from their meanings, and thus is *passive reading*.

Active reading looks different for different people but shares some common themes: *it is best characterized as thinking along with the text*. To practice engaged reading, ask yourself questions as you read, and take notes. (Note-taking could be in the margin of the text or in a notebook or on the computer.) Reading in this way will draw your attention not only to the intricacies of the arguments, but also to the ways they are constructed: writing style, word choice, rhythms and patterns of writing, forms of argumentation and the use of evidence. The absence of any of these aspects of a text are also worth noting. It is also important to read the footnotes, endnotes, and other commentaries.

Active reading is also a method of preparation for class. If you are reading actively, you are also building your close and analytical reading skills, and it will be easier to reference the text when you participate in class discussion.

Here are examples of questions to ask yourself as you read:*

1. What is the main argument the author is making? Are there multiple main arguments? How are the arguments organized? Are there sub-arguments? Are they necessary/helpful to the main argument? Why/why not?
2. What are the key terms or concepts?
3. In what ways does the author define the terms or concepts used?
4. Do any of the arguments change, develop, or become more nuanced as the text progresses?
5. What evidence does the author use? Are they in the form of facts/statistics? Stories? Allegories? Metaphor?
6. To whom is the text addressed? Is that clear from what is presented in the text?
7. In what genre is the text written? Letter? Essay? Dialogue? Narrative? Does it change over the course of the text?
8. What adjectives can describe the writing style? Is it lyrical? Is it emotive? Is it argumentative? Is the text without embellishment or flourish?
9. What types of words does the author continuously use? Why do you think certain words are repeated? What meaning can be drawn from this?
10. What was interesting to you in the text? Did an idea, passage, or concept stay in your head? Why?
11. With which elements of the text did you agree? Disagree? If you're unsure, why?
12. What criticisms do you have of the author's argument(s)? Why?

*Not meant to be exhaustive

13. Does this text remind you of another you've read? Why? What can we learn from drawing out these connections?

You do not need to address each and every one of these questions to be reading actively. Nor are these the only questions you could ask of a text. Having them in mind as you read – perhaps focusing on two or three – will help you in working through the text in such a way that you are prepared for analysis, participation and engagement in class, and in working with the text for any assignment in which you are asked to construct your own interpretation of the text and place the author in dialogue with others you've read.

There is also no expectation that you will have noticed or comprehended all aspects of the text. If these texts were easily understood or mastered, they would not have generated decades, if not centuries, of interpretation and argument (scholarship). We keep reading these texts because we continue to learn from, be confused by, outraged by, or engaged by them. These questions for active reading aim to guide you to familiarity with some aspects of the text and be able to discuss their theses and ideas with others by drawing from specific quotations or passages.