

Close Reading of Academic Texts

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the types of reading material you will likely encounter in college, and the importance of practicing close reading when engaging with academic texts. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Types of College Reading Material
 - a. Textbooks
 - b. Articles
 - c. Literature and Nonfiction Books
2. Purpose of Academic Reading
3. Reading Strategies for Academic Texts
 - a. Get to Know the Conventions
 - b. Keep Track of Unfamiliar Terms and Phrases
 - c. Look for Main Ideas and Themes
 - d. Make the Most of Online Reading
 - e. Find Reliable Online Sources
 - f. Pay Attention to Visual Information

1. Types of College Reading Material

As a college student, you will eventually choose a major, or focus of study. In your first year or so, though, you'll probably have to complete "core" or required classes in different subjects.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Even if you plan to major in business, you may still have to take at least one science, history, and math class.

These different academic disciplines (and the instructors who teach them) can vary greatly in terms of the materials that students are assigned to read. Not all college reading is the same, so what types can you expect to encounter?

1a. Textbooks

Probably the most familiar reading material in college is the textbook. These are academic books, usually focused on one discipline. Their primary purpose is to educate readers on a particular subject, such as

It's not uncommon for instructors to use one textbook as the primary text for an entire course. Instructors typically assign chapters as readings and may include any word problems or questions in the textbook, too.

1b. Articles

Instructors may also assign academic articles or news articles. Academic articles are written by people who specialize in a particular field or subject, while news articles may be from recent newspapers and magazines.

➦ **EXAMPLE** In a science class, you may be asked to read an academic article on the benefits of rainforest preservation, whereas in a government class, you may be asked to read an article summarizing a recent presidential debate.

Instructors may have you read the articles online or they may distribute copies in class or electronically. The chief difference between news and academic articles is the intended audience of the publication.

News articles are mass media; they are written for a broad audience, and they are published in magazines and newspapers that are generally available for purchase at grocery stores or bookstores. They may also be available online.

Academic articles, on the other hand, are usually published in scholarly journals with fairly small circulations. While you won't be able to purchase individual journal issues from a bookstore, public and school libraries do make these journal issues and individual articles available. It's common to access academic articles through online databases hosted by libraries.

1c. Literature and Nonfiction Books

Instructors use literature and nonfiction books in their classes to teach students about different genres, events, time periods, and perspectives.

➦ **EXAMPLE** A history instructor might ask you to read the diary of a girl who lived during the Great Depression so that you can learn what life was like back then. In an English class, your instructor might assign a series of short stories written during the 1960s by different American authors so that you can compare styles and thematic concerns.

Literature includes short stories, novels or novellas, graphic novels, drama, and poetry. Nonfiction works include creative nonfiction - narrative stories told from real life - as well as history, biography, and reference materials.

Textbooks and scholarly articles are specific types of nonfiction; often their purpose is to instruct, whereas other forms of nonfiction may be written to inform, to persuade, or to entertain.

2. Purpose of Academic Reading

Casual reading across genres, from books and magazines to newspapers and blogs, is something students should be encouraged to do in their free time, because it can be both educational and fun. It doesn't require the reader to retain or regurgitate information; typically, casual reading is done for pleasure.

In college, however, instructors generally expect students to read resources that have particular value in the context of a course. **Close reading** is something students practice in school. It means reading with a closer lens in order to learn information, retain that information, and possibly use that learned information to support an essay or other written assignment.

Reading closely is part of what differentiates casual reading from academic reading. So why is academic reading beneficial?

- **The information comes from reputable sources:** Web sites and blogs can be a source of insight and information, but not all are useful as academic resources. They may be written by people or companies whose main purpose is to share an opinion or sell you something. Academic sources such as textbooks and scholarly journal articles, on the other hand, are usually written by experts in the field and have to pass stringent peer review requirements in order to get published.
- **You learn how to form arguments:** In many of your future college courses, your instructors will likely expect you to write a paper that is argumentative in style. This means that the goal of the paper is to research a topic and develop an argument about it using evidence and facts to support your position. Since many college reading assignments (especially journal articles) are written in a similar style, you'll gain experience studying their strategies and learning to apply them.
- **You gain exposure to different viewpoints:** One purpose of assigned academic readings is to give students exposure to different viewpoints and ideas. For example, in an ethics class, you might be asked to read a series of articles written by medical professionals and religious leaders who are pro-life or pro-choice and consider the validity of their arguments. Such experience can help you wrestle with ideas and beliefs in new ways and develop a better understanding of how others' views differ from your own.



TERM TO KNOW

Close Reading

Reading that involves viewing a text through a more focused lens in order to learn and retain information, sometimes for the purpose of using that information to support an essay or other written assignment.

3. Reading Strategies for Academic Texts

Recall that close reading requires more engagement than just reading the words on the page. In order to learn and retain what you read, it's a good idea to do things like circling key words, writing notes, and reflecting.

Actively reading academic texts can be challenging for students who are used to reading for entertainment alone, but practicing the following steps, which you were introduced to in the first unit of this course, will get you up to speed.



STEP BY STEP

1. **Preview:** You can gain insight from an academic text before you even begin the reading assignment. For example, if you are assigned a nonfiction book, read the title, the back of the book, and the table of contents. Scanning this information can give you an initial idea of what you'll be reading and some useful context for thinking about it. You can also start to make connections between the new reading and knowledge you already have, which is another strategy for retaining information.

2. **Read:** While you read an academic text, you should have a pen or pencil in hand. Circle or highlight key concepts. Write questions or comments in the margins or in a notebook. This will help you remember what you are reading and also build a personal connection with the subject matter.
3. **Summarize:** After you have read an academic text, it's worth taking the time to write a short summary—even if your instructor doesn't require it. The exercise of jotting down a few sentences or a short paragraph capturing the main ideas of the reading is enormously beneficial: It not only helps you understand and absorb what you read, but also gives you study and review materials for exams and other writing assignments.
4. **Review:** It always helps to revisit what you've read for a quick refresher. It may not be practical to thoroughly reread assignments from start to finish, but before class discussions or tests, it's a good idea to skim through them to identify the main points, reread any notes at the ends of chapters, and review any summaries you've written.

Still, in college, it's not uncommon to experience frustration with reading assignments from time to time. Because you're doing more reading on your own outside the classroom, and with less frequent contact with instructors than you had in high school, it's possible you'll encounter readings that contain unfamiliar vocabulary or don't readily make sense.

Different disciplines and subjects have different writing conventions and styles, and it can take some practice to get to know them. Luckily, there are strategies that can support you as you progress through the above steps to tackle more challenging texts.

3a. Get to Know the Conventions

Academic texts, like scientific studies and journal articles, may have sections that are new to you.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If you're not sure what an "abstract" is, research it online or ask your instructor.

Understanding the meaning and purpose of such conventions is not only helpful for reading comprehension but for writing, too.

3b. Keep Track of Unfamiliar Terms and Phrases

Have a good college dictionary such as Merriam-Webster handy (or find it online) when you read complex academic texts, so you can look up the meaning of unfamiliar words and terms as needed.



Many textbooks also contain glossaries or "key terms" sections at the ends of chapters or the end of the book. If you can't find the words you're looking for in a standard dictionary, you may need one specially written for a particular discipline. For example, a medical dictionary would be a good resource for a course in anatomy and physiology.

If you circle or underline terms and phrases that appear repeatedly, you'll have a visual reminder to review and learn them. Repetition helps to lock in these new words and their meaning and get them into your long-term memory. The more you review them, the more you'll understand and feel comfortable using them.

3c. Look for Main Ideas and Themes

As a college student, you are not expected to understand every single word or idea presented in a reading,

especially if you haven't discussed it in class yet. However, you will get more out of discussions and feel more confident about asking questions if you can identify the main idea or thesis in a reading.

The thesis statement can often (but not always) be found in the introductory paragraph, and it may be introduced with a phrase like "In this essay I argue that...." Getting a handle on the overall reason an author wrote something (to prove or explore something, for instance) gives you a framework for understanding more of the details.

It's also useful to keep track of any themes you notice in the writing. A theme may be a recurring idea, word, or image that strikes you as interesting or important:

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you are reading a short story, you might make a note saying something like "This story is about men working in a gloomy factory, but the author keeps mentioning birds and windows. Why is that?"

3d. Make the Most of Online Reading

Reading online texts presents unique challenges for some students. For one thing, you can't readily circle or underline key terms or passages on the screen with a pencil. For another, there can be many tempting distractions, like a quick visit to Amazon or Facebook.

While there's no substitute for old-fashioned self-discipline, you can take advantage of the following tips to make online reading more efficient and effective:

- Where possible, download the reading as a PDF, Word document, etc., so you can read it offline.
- Get one of the apps that allow you to disable your social media sites for specified periods of time.
- Adjust your screen to avoid glare and eye strain, and change the text font to be less distracting.
- Install an annotation tool, such as hypothes.is, in your web browser, so you can highlight and make notes on online text. A low-tech option is to have a notebook handy to write in as you read.

3e. Look for Reliable Online Sources

Professors tend to assign reading from reliable print and online sources, so you can feel comfortable referencing such sources in class and for writing assignments. If you are looking for online sources independently, however, devote some time and energy to critically evaluating the quality of the source before spending time reading any resources you find there.

Find out what you can about the author (if one is listed), the website, and any sponsors it may have. Check that the information is current and accurate against similar information on other pages.



Depending on what you are researching, sites that end in ".edu" (indicating an "education" site, such as a college, university, or other academic institution) tend to be more reliable than ".com" sites.

3f. Pay Attention to Visual Information

Images in textbooks or journals usually contain valuable information to help you more deeply grasp a topic.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Graphs and charts help show the relationship between different kinds of information or data, like how a population changes over time.

Data-rich graphics can take longer to "read" than the text around them because they present a lot of information in a condensed form. Give yourself plenty of time to study these items, as they often provide new and lasting ideas that are easy to recall later (like in the middle of an exam on that topic!).



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned more about how to approach academic reading. There are several **types of college reading material** that you are likely to come across during your time in school, including **textbooks, articles, and literature and nonfiction books**. The **purpose of this academic reading** is to introduce you to information from reliable sources, show you how to form arguments, and expose you to different viewpoints. To achieve this purpose, you will need to perform close reading, or a focused reading that allows you to learn and retain information for later use.

You also learned that in addition to the process of previewing, reading, summarizing, and reviewing, there are some **reading strategies for academic texts** that can help you approach more challenging material. These strategies include **getting to know the conventions** of academic reading materials, **keeping track of unfamiliar words and phrases** that you may want to look up later, **looking for main ideas and themes** that appear throughout the text, **making the most of online reading** by eliminating distractions and taking notes, **looking for reliable online sources** when you need more information about a topic, and **paying attention to visual information** that may be included in the material.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Reading Strategies" tutorial.



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