



IWU WC | TS'S Guide to Sympathetic and Critical Reading and Annotating

There are two major goals when you read critically:

- (1) To understand the text (read sympathetically).
 - a. Here, you give the author the benefit of the doubt. You assume they, he, or she has something important to say and you make every effort to understand it. You are an ally with the writer.
- (2) To challenge the text (read critically).
 - a. Here, you confront the author, assuming that he, they, or she is wrong-headed, misinformed, out to distort things. You are an opponent of the writer.

There are three stages of critical reading:

- (1) Pre-reading (focus: to understand)
 - a. Read the title. Tap into what you know about the subject. Think about other texts you may have read on this topic.
 - b. Read the first and last paragraphs. Try to get a grasp on the writer's perspective on the topic. Underline thesis sentences. Understand the writer's purpose: is it to inform, or persuade?
 - c. Skim through, looking mainly at section headings. For a book, look at the table of contents. Try to get a handle on the article or book's structure.
 - d. If there is information about the author, read that. Knowing what other texts the author has written may help.
- (2) First reading (focus: to understand and respond)
 - a. Underline or highlight topic sentences or key phrases. Limit yourself to one sentence per paragraph. The purpose here is to speed up your re-reading. Mark in the book if you own it. Mark on a photocopy if it's a library book. When reading a book, you can use small stickies to mark important passages, and you can write on the stickies to summarize or gloss.
 - b. Gloss. Write one- to four-word summaries of paragraphs or sections.
 - c. Identify sections. Use brackets on a page to group paragraphs into subsections. Write a one- to four-word gloss of sections.
 - d. Identify confusing passages, or sudden shifts in the argument. Often these indicate significant statements or important new assumptions in the argument. Develop a shorthand system: maybe question marks for passages you don't understand, new vocabulary words, arguments which seem illogical; exclamation points for passages which surprise or startle you; a circle with cross bar to indicate counter arguments, rebuttals, or passages with which you strongly disagree.

Pro Tip: Try using the left margin for the notes you make during the first reading stage.

- e. Look at your gloss and section tags. Jot down, on a separate piece of paper, in your own words, the structure of the text.

(3) Second reading (focus: to respond)

- a. Re-read the text, paying particular attention to your glosses and shorthand tags, especially question and exclamation marks. Write brief phrases (or whole sentences if you prefer) opposite passages to which you reacted.
- b. Ask yourself WHY you reacted to the author's idea/passage. What other writers or texts does an idea/passage remind you of? Write connections in the margins.
- c. If you could vote on an idea or argument presented by a writer, how would you vote? Why?
- d. Try to take an author's idea one step further. Imagine what would happen with an idea 10, 20 years in the future. Imagine what would happen in a different historical period in the past. Imagine if the writer's proposal was applied to a different group of people.
- e. Imagine your current writer engaged in a debate with another author you know. How would the latter respond to the former?
- f. Review your own responses to the text and try to engage yourself in conversation. Play devil's advocate with your own ideas.

Pro Tip: Try using the right margin for the notes you make during the second reading stage.

As you complete the three stages, make a list of important features you notice, like this one:

	Reading Sympathetically	Reading Critically
Stage 1: What I noticed		
Stage 2: What I noticed		
Stage 3: What I noticed		

This list will allow you to examine quickly where you agree with the text (reading sympathetically or with the grain) and where you find yourself in conflict with the text (reading critically or against the grain). It's a good space to jot down page numbers, first, second, and third impressions, and how your reactions might even change from reading to reading.