

## Overview

In this course, we will read various types of academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs (single-authored books), and edited volumes (book collections of chapters from multiple authors on a shared topic). Journal articles might span empirical reports, theoretical expositions, programmatic manifestos, and literature and book reviews. The majority of these will come from the discipline of anthropology, but we will learn from historians, geographers, philosophers, and design theorists and practitioners. Infrequently, we will all read news, long-form journalism, and fiction.

Reading is one of six skills we will develop over the semester. It goes without saying that reading is one of the most indispensable skills that you can cultivate in our contemporary moment. This guide will help you to improve your ability to read actively, critically and, above all, *generously*, with a focus on reading scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, in particular ethnography. I do not expect that you will address all the questions below, but I do hope that you pick up some tricks and carry them forward with you on your learning journey. Remember: it takes time to learn to read well. Keep practicing, and don't give up if a text does not immediately itself. Below are a series of questions to help you exercise your reading skills. What other ways of reading can you discover?

## Method

- I. Title and headings
- II. Biography and date
- III. Introduction and conclusion
- IV. First and last sentences
- V. Evidence and presentation
- VI. Assessment and reflection

## Beginning

Before you even read the first sentence, you should survey the title, the section headings, and, in the case of books, the table of contents. Alternatively, with articles, you should read the abstract if one is available. These will indicate the key themes that the author plans to address in addition to the logic between them. Think of these as the bones of a text that you can flesh out with a detailed, or granular, reading. Once you know the themes, you might reflect on *why* I assigned that text. How does it relate to the week's topic, and to the previous week's topic? How does it relate to the other texts I selected for that day? Are they all voicing the same thing, or do they contradict one another? Why might I include contradictory texts?

You should also consider the author: Who are they? Where are they from? What is their profession? Where do they work? What else have they written? Books and articles usually have an autobiographical blurb at the beginning or the end of the text. From this information, you can gain a sense of their intellectual background and sometimes their sociocultural identity (race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, dis/ability, etc.). In academia, we describe this as their "positionality" or "standpoint." Ideas do not appear from nowhere, *ex nihilo*. People create ideas—people in all of their messy, complicated, and emotional fleshiness.<sup>1</sup> Through our everyday interactions with the world, we produce knowledge. As such, knowledge is "situated," as Donna Haraway says. As you read, you

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<sup>1</sup> Identifying the author's identity does not discredit or discount their claims, for all authors have an identity or standpoint. There is no standpoint outside of our conventional modes of knowledge—that is, no "god's-eye view."

might wonder how the author's "situation"—their identity, background, desires, dreams, anxieties, privileges, and ideologies—shapes the words they leave on the page. You should also heed the date: What current events were happening? How might they affect their "situation"? Can you see the text as a response to those events? Does their viewpoint exemplify, or perhaps oppose, orthodox values at the time of writing?

For graduate students: If you do not already read footnotes closely, you should begin now. Much of a text's inter-textuality appears in the footnotes. It is there where you can find the author's theoretical armamentarium. I would also suggest that you read acknowledgements. These are usually the most intimate and personal sections of a text. In this section, you can find out about the author's funding sources (follow the money!), advising genealogy, professional networks, and the people, and animals, with whom they "make kin." Lastly, I recommend that you pay attention to the publisher in addition to the series (book) or volume (journal), if relevant. Where do they place emphasis—theory, empirics, narrative? Where would you like to see your work appear?

## Reading

Scholarship, with very few exceptions, makes an argument. Your job as a reader is to clarify and distill that argument. To do so, you will essentially ask two questions: *What* does the author think, and *how* do they make that argument? Another way to say this is: What are the *claims*, and what are the *warrants*?

To assess the *claims*, ask yourself: What is the subject, or topic, of this text—that is, what might it be trying to examine or explain? What is the author saying *about* that subject? What is their research question about that subject? How do they propose to answer the question? To put it otherwise, what is their thesis, their main idea? What does the author say is new, unique, or different from previous approaches to this subject? What intervention is it making? What do they hold constant, or affirm, and what do they change, or negate? Whom do they cite? Have they cited other readings that we have done? What are their similarities and differences?

To assess the *warrants*, ask yourself: What data does the author put forth to justify their claims? What is the form of their evidence: numerical, verbal, and/or visual (diagrams, or photos)? What were their methods? What concepts do they use to interpret their data? What research do they reference to support those interpretations? How do they adapt or re-purpose those references? How is the text organized? What role does that play? How did the author make their argument rhetorically and stylistically? What literary devices and tropes did they use, either intentionally or unintentionally?

Skimming is an invaluable technique that you can use to begin to answer these questions. Within academic writing, the introduction and the conclusion typically contain most of the argument an author will make. Read these in their entirety first to know where they begin and how they end. At that point, you can skim the paragraphs of each section. By minding the first and last sentences of each paragraph, you can follow the logic of the text: what they want to say and how they get to it. This will prevent you from getting lost in asides, digressions, and extraneous information. Along the way, if you see *italicized* words or phrases, note these. Scholars employ italics to mark an emphasis on their strongest opinions, divergent perspectives, or theoretical contributions.

After skimming, it is up to you to decide how to proceed. What is your objective? Does discussion, or the assignment, require you to know more details? Do *you* want to know more details?

A note on annotation: To read *critically*, and ultimately *generously*, you must learn to read *actively*. Skillful readers accomplish this through annotation. While full note-taking is the ideal, this is often impractical in the hubbub of everyday life and its demands on your time. Annotating your text is one of the most efficient workarounds. Highlighting and underlining are two of the simplest kinds of annotation. I recommend saving these tactics for the thesis, jargon, definitions, and data or prose

that are surprising, pivotal, elegant, confusing, or enraging. If you overuse highlights, you dilute their salience—their ability to stand out to you, later. They also do not require much thought on your end. A more advanced kind of annotation involves your scribbling in the margins, or “marginalia” as they are called. At the simplest level, this could entail the transcription of key concepts and their meaning; however, you should aim to put the author’s ideas in your own words. When I started as a reader, I’d summarize each paragraph in one word or phrase. I’d also mark words, references, or passages that I did not understand to revisit and research after I finished. As your reading skills grow, you can begin to note connections to other texts, recurring themes, and other reflections. You are the best judge of what works for you, and your marginalia should reflect your personal, informal style of engagement. Perhaps doodling is better than verbalization. I happen to find it useful to jot down the key concepts and themes on the inside cover, with page numbers, as aids for future recall.

Once you have dissected the text’s argument, you can turn to its evaluation—to the development of your opinion. Understanding the logic of a text is important, but the goal is for you to take a stance toward it. Initially, you should ask: What motivated their argument? Why would they say that? What is their purpose or intent? Is their argument successful? Is it substantiated by the data they provided, the concepts, and the methodologies? Why or why not? What are the implications for related fields of knowledge? Answering these questions will push you to think *critically* about the text. There are many ways to critique. A common one is to search for tensions or contradictions: between evidence, between concepts, or between what is said, and what is unsaid. Another way to critique the text is to ask what assumptions it makes. Every text will hold some knowledge as inviolable. You can think of this as the “ground” of the text: that which the author holds stable. Is its ground necessarily true? Just as the text’s ground will make some “figures” apparent, it might also obscure others. What are those invisible figures? What, or whom, does the author leave out, and why? Over the past years, scholars have been rightly concerned with the “politics of citation,” with whom authors reference or choose to ignore. Do you see that at play in this text?

As you read and carefully articulate your critiques, it is important to do so *generously* with regards to the author’s meaning. Certain texts are, without a shred of doubt, problematic, whether theoretically, methodologically, or morally. Others might be flawed, yet still they afford new vantage points. Does your critique require a rejection of the text in its entirety, or can it be salvaged? What can this text allow you to think, and to do, that you could not before, despite its shortcomings? What did you like about it? How did it make you feel? What could you emulate in your work? By addressing critique in the spirit of generosity—both toward the text and the author who composed it—you can practice an ethic of fairness and balance in your reading praxis.

## Talking

There are many ways to process, or digest, scholarship and put it into practice. In this course, talking, writing, and designing are the three principal activities that will help us operationalize our knowledge of space, power, and species. This section will focus on talking, or seminar discussion. Future guides will elaborate upon writing and designing.

In this course, discussion will focus on the analysis of *how* authors frame and talk about certain subjects, their webs of significance and structures of meaning. We will be interested in the comparative analysis of theoretical concepts and narrative styles—less so “yes/no” questions and/or questions with factual answers that Google can provide than in open-ended inquiry. By thinking of comments in the form of the 4 Q’s (below), we can contribute towards a robust, lively conversation.

Quotation: Isolates a significant passage.

Query: Points toward a silence or lacuna

Quandary: Indicates a tension or contradiction

Quibble: Highlights a shortcoming or flaw

For examples, you may refer to the Perusall function on Canvas.

### **Beginning, Again**

Just as the production of knowledge is “situated,” so too is its reception! The way that you will interpret a text, and what you ultimately get out of it, will vary by mood, energy, interest, attention, and your own intellectual, political, and ethical growth as a person. Subsequent readings of the same text might disclose new depths (or expose its shallowness). Therefore: read, re-read, repeat.

Reading is a skill that you will continue to develop throughout your lifetime. Each time you read, you might attempt to ask one new type of question of the text. For additional resources, especially advice on the *ergonomics of reading* (i.e., pacing, bodily comfort, breaks, environment, etc.), please refer to the literature below.

### **Further Reading**

#### GENERAL:

Robert DiYanni (2021), *You Are What You Read: A Practical Guide to Reading Well*  
Michael Burger (2022), *Reading History*

#### ETHNOGRAPHY:

James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*  
David Jacobson (1991), *Reading Ethnography*  
Paul Atkinson (1992), *Understanding Ethnographic Texts*  
Ruth Behar (1996), *Women Writing Culture*  
Martin Hammersley (2014), *Reading Ethnographic Research: A Critical Guide*  
Paloma Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle (2019), *How to Read Ethnography*  
Ståle Wig and Nefissa Naguib (2021), “The Poetics of Deep Reading: A Field Guide to Getting Lost in a Book,” *Cultural Anthropology* website

#### EPISTEMOLOGY:

Donna Haraway (1988), “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”  
Patricia Hill Collins (1990), *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*