Chapter 6. Reading as a Writer

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize rhetorical features of a reading task
- Identify reading strategies that match your goals and your text
- Reflect to select reading strategies to use before, during, and after you read
- Adapt your reading approaches to new situations

Almost nobody says "I have reader's block."

But lots of people say, "I just didn't understand that whole chapter." Or, "That writer was so confusing." Or maybe, "That was boring—nobody could relate to that." Sometimes people say, "I hate reading," or "Reading is what people in _____ (some other field) do, so I don't worry about it much."

What readers often mean, though, is, "I had difficulty reading that text." And that's ok: having challenges reading particular texts doesn't mean that you lack intelligence or that you aren't ready for advanced study. All experts have to learn to identify and then solve particular problems so they can go on and do the other parts of the work they love; as a writer who reads, you can improve in both of these areas.

6.1 Reading as a Writer is Strategic and Rhetorical

Since reading is the necessary partner of writing, several of the threshold concepts about writing can inform our work as readers:

> ### 🚪 There is no single definition of a "good writer"
>
> Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

Just as there is no such thing as a "bad writer" for all writing everywhere, there is no such thing as a "bad reader." All readers are very capable at reading some texts, whether those are social media posts, graphic novels, or quarterly financial reports at your workplace. And all readers struggle to read some texts, especially texts that feature unfamiliar information or an unfamiliar structure or style.

> ### 🚪 You can become a good writer and a better writer
>
> You already have many viable writing skills, and you are capable of becoming a better writer and a competent writer of many kinds of texts.

Advanced writers also need advanced reading strategies: not only do we need to understand others' ideas as part of our own inquiry, but we need to be able to spot other writers' strategies so we can learn how to improve our own. Fortunately, everyone can become a better reader of one text, a better reader of a genre or type of text, and a better reader of new or unfamiliar texts, through awareness and practice.

🚪 Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Although we don't talk about "learning to read" much after childhood, reading isn't a one-and-done skill; it's an ongoing lifetime challenge. For instance, reading a quarterly report is more difficult than reading a social media post, and requires different skills. So advanced readers are always learning, and that means we often struggle and we nearly always need to revise our reading strategies to match a new task.

🚪 Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

Reading—particularly the kind of rhetorical reading that writers and other professionals need to do—isn't an unconscious activity that anyone who knows the definitions of words does automatically. Advanced readers need strategies, opportunities for practice, and reflective awareness in order to fully succeed in their work.

Advanced reading: "Just do it" vs. "Identify, plan, and adapt"

Think back to the last time you sat down to complete a major reading assignment: perhaps last week, or yesterday, or even right now with this text. Did you take any time or steps before you started reading to help you adjust to the reading challenges you were about to encounter, or did you "just do it," opening to the first page and diving in?

If you "just dove in," why did that make sense as a strategy to you?

- **High confidence**: You had been reading school books and professional documents for decades, and you were pretty sure you'd know how to do it.
- **Low confidence**: You frequently get stuck while reading, and didn't think there was anything you could really do to help it, so you should just get it over with as quickly as possible.
- **High interest:** You were truly fascinated by the topic, genre, or author.
- **Low interest**: You didn't think that the topic was interesting or didn't think that this reading task was particularly important for your success.
- **Low time**: You had limited time, and you thought that the fastest way through was to just get started and push through it.

These are common responses to reading tasks, yet sometimes they can limit advanced readers' ability to complete individual tasks and improve as readers overall. Of course, if the "just do it" approach is working for you and making you

happy as a reader, then you might not need any other strategies (at least not yet). Before you decide that that's your situation, though, consider if you have recently thought about any of the challenges below while reading for school or work:

- I become tired or bored and lose my focus.
- I get to the middle and don't understand where the author is going with it.
- I get stuck trying to figure out unfamiliar words or concepts.
- I run out of time to complete the reading task.
- I don't always spot the "deeper meaning" that other readers do.
- I don't remember important parts of what I read a few days after reading.
- I can't connect what I'm reading to other texts or concepts in the class.
- I think I understand and remember what I read, but I end up giving incorrect answers in a discussion or on a test.

Lots of students and professionals share these ideas and experiences about reading, even advanced readers and writers. As with writing, we don't always talk about the fact that readers often struggle to work with a task and even fail to complete their reading work the first time through. Like writing, also, reading is not something you learn once as a child and then always do well. In order to become a better reader, you need to be able to acknowledge new challenges and direct some of your attention to creating better approaches.

Research on reading shows that readers—like writers—are more successful when we reflect to identify possible reading problems before we read, plan for and apply strategies as we read, and look for ways to adapt our thinking after we read. Instead of "just reading," advanced readers can use reflection to foster our success throughout our work with a text: before we begin reading, as we read, and after we read.

It takes time to get used to advanced strategies like the ones discussed here. It may feel artificial, because you are used to "just reading," and often you are successful at "just reading." And of course, you may not want to use an advanced approach for all texts; you may still want to use your "just do it" approach for easier texts like news sites, headphone instructions, horoscopes, celebrity blogs, and even some of your school textbooks if they don't pose reading difficulties.

Using reflective strategies as a reader will be crucial, however,

- when you need to understand a difficult, important, or unmotivating text,
- when you need to assess an argument or evaluate the credibility of data, or
- when you will need to convey an author's information to other readers accurately and concisely.

In these cases, you should find that the strategies in this section improve both your efficiency and satisfaction as a reader.

Explore 6.1

Write a brief profile of yourself as a reader. What do you most like to read (or least dislike), and why? What kind of reading makes you less interested or more frustrated? What helps make reading smooth for you, or makes it more difficult? Are there any differences between your reading-self outside of school and the way you read for school or work tasks?

Read conversationally and rhetorically

To improve as an advanced reader, you should practice reading some more complicated texts using conversational and rhetorical strategies.

Read conversationally. Instead of seeing the text as an unchanging thing on a page or screen from which you will retrieve information, you can imagine the text as representing the voice of another writer just like you, an ordinary human being who has chosen specific strategies to inform, engage, and persuade you and other readers.

If you were in a physical room—or a virtual real-time chat—with the writer, you might:

- Engage in the conversation with them: you would ask questions, challenge their claims, and make comments of your own.
- Evaluate each statement critically: you would avoid assuming that the writer's statements were correct or that they automatically gave you the whole story.
- Support a lively exchange of ideas with other readers: you would listen to others who were responding or contributing ideas, and you would encourage them to add details that they remember from their experiences or their learned knowledge.

In other words, your participation would help create the conversation: it would be a different conversation without you than it is with you there. The same is true for reading. The text on the page doesn't hold 100% of the meaning: since language is a complicated and uncertain way to communicate, each reader must bring some of our own knowledge and interpretation to the process. That is, like writers, readers create knowledge as we read, rather than only receiving it.

As an advanced reader, you should read conversationally: ask not just what the author has said but who else the author has been conversing with, and be ready to contribute your questions, concerns, connections, and experiences to the conversation as you read.

Read rhetorically. Advanced readers stay aware of our own goals or purposes in reading, and the author's goals or purposes in writing. Knowing your purpose will change your rhetorical strategy. For instance:

- If you are *reading to memorize facts*, you will retain more in your memory not by highlighting and rereading lists of key ideas, but by actively connecting those ideas to a familiar context (what do they remind you of?) and by challenging yourself to recall them in different circumstances (such as by writing summaries or creating a map).

- If you are *reading to understand a complicated argument*, you will improve by trying to predict its outcome from the start, without finishing the text: even if your prediction is wrong, your early engagement with the complicated idea helps your brain start to form a mental model.

Moreover, writers who are aware of our own composing strategies often start to notice what other writers do, the way that soccer players notice another player always feinting to the left or pianists notice whether another player's trill is even or uneven.

- If you are *reading like a writer* you try to become aware of how a document is framed, organized, and developed—how it meets the expectations of its genre or its discourse community—since your understanding of the writing patterns and strategies will help you spot key information and important arguments.

The more you know what you are trying to accomplish by reading, and what the writer was trying to accomplish while writing, the more you will know what to pay attention to and how to organize what you are learning. As an advanced writer, that is, you read rhetorically: you choose strategies for reading based on your own goals, and you ask not just what the author has written but how the author has constructed the document and what goals the author had.

Read in multiple stages. Finally, in order to read conversationally and rhetorically—which some people will call "reading actively" and some people will call "reading critically"—you will often need to read in stages, using a reading process just as you use a writing process. Advanced readers benefit from using different strategies for different steps of reading.

- By using **pre-reading strategies** for just a few minutes before you begin reading, you can identify the difficulties you might face, frame your own goals for reading, and predict key arguments or examples you need to understand.

- By using **active reading strategies** as you read—not just highlighting, but taking targeted notes that help you focus on the conversation and the rhetorical situation—you can stay engaged, identify the most useful or important information, and remember more of what you read.

- By using **post-reading strategies**, you can improve your comprehension and memory of the text, and prepare to think critically and integratively about what you read.

Initially, this staged approach may seem as though it takes more of your time than the way you read now. But if you have ever experienced any of the reading problems listed earlier in this chapter, you know that the "just do it" approach can both slow you down and leave you unsatisfied at the finish.

In some cases, a pre- or post-reading stage may take just a minute or two; in others it may take longer, but you'll always gain the advantage of being the advanced reader in control of what you are learning. These steps are important not because you are a poor reader, but because you are encountering more challenging reading tasks (without more time to spend reading them), and you need the insight and dependable recall that can only come from advanced reading.

As an advanced reader, you should read in stages: you plan for each stage, you choose the right approach for each stage, and you save your time and energy by reading according to your plan rather than reading in a distracted, confused, or partially informed manner.

Rethink reading: Five more advanced strategies

In addition to reading conversationally, rhetorically, and in stages, you should be aware of five additional approaches that advanced readers use. Which of these approaches do you already use, and which of them might you consider adopting?

Advanced readers often re-read strategically

Re-reading a document—whether in small parts or overall—is not a sign of failure. Just as advanced writers plan to revise an early draft, advanced readers often plan to re-read, especially:

- When a section of the document has **complicated** arguments or densely packed information
- When understanding a document is **crucial** to the reader's success in a course, assignment, or project
- When they will need to accurately **share** or comment on key arguments or information from a document
- When the information or writing style of a document is **unfamiliar**—as when a botanist reads a text about political principles are related to ecosystem conservation
- When they have **learned new** information or principles from other sources that will help them understand and contextualize the ideas in the document

Caveat: Advanced readers know that studies show that simply "reviewing" a document—glancing back over highlighted pages—doesn't help with understanding or memory, but active re-reading with a clear goal often brings much stronger comprehension.

Advanced readers don't always read every word in order

Skimming and skipping around in a document isn't cheating (or a sign of being a bad reader), as long as you focus on understanding the general context of a document. Advanced readers often read in a nonlinear style, especially:

- When a document is **long** and time is short: skimming high-impact sections of a document—such as the beginning and end, the abstract and results section, the subheaders and first lines of each section—helps readers develop a clear overview and decide how much (if any) in-depth reading they should do

- When understanding a whole document is of **lower importance**: during early stages of secondary research or a class project, readers often read selectively in order to decide whether a document is relevant, credible, and accessible

- When some terminology or examples are **unfamiliar**: skipping over a few words or paragraphs that are particularly difficult can help you stay focused, and often you will learn enough context from the rest of the article to understand the general idea

- When some or all of the document is **familiar**: a reader investigating family leave programs probably doesn't need to read every article's "history of family leave laws" section as closely as they read the first one

Caveat: Advanced readers know that "**Ctrl-F reading**"—using a "find" feature to just read every sentence that mentions *dogs* or *imperialism*—is not strategic or rhetorical, because it pulls items out of context and so the reader runs a high risk of misunderstanding and misrepresenting an author's key points. If you need to speed up your reading, you should make rhetorical choices that help you locate high quality writing, such as reading the very first paragraph and the final paragraph, or the first sentences of each key section, in order to understand an author's main contributions.

Advanced readers seek extra help

Not every document that you are assigned or choose to read was designed for you: authors are often writing for readers who have more experience, more knowledge, or more interest in a topic than you do. Advanced readers don't assume that a document contains everything they need to read it successfully—or that they should just give up if they get stuck. Instead, they:

- **Review** earlier readings or notes to help remember major theories, approaches, or events that are relevant to the current document

- **Search** online—often to a generalist source like Wikipedia, or via questions to a chatbot—to find a quick overview of basic information about

history, terminology, or perspectives that will help them understand what the current document is about

- **Look up** some key terms that are unfamiliar, or are used in unfamiliar ways, that keep appearing in a document

- **Ask an expert**, an instructor, or a supervisor what strategies they use, or recommend using, to read documents in their field successfully

- **Ask a friend** or imagine another reader in another situation in order to see how and why a document that seems impenetrable might be interesting or relevant to someone else

Caveat: Advanced readers who look online for help understanding a text or its concepts **know when to stop:** they use targeted strategies to answer one or two questions and then stop when they've learned some basics, rather than getting distracted by reading page after page on the internet.

Advanced readers vary their pace

Research shows that a reader's pace does not correlate with a reader's comprehension in any general way. Some readers, with some purposes, in some parts of some documents, will benefit from reading more slowly, and others won't. Advanced readers often:

- Use a **higher** speed when a document or topic is **familiar**, and a slower speed when a document or a section covers new knowledge or experiences

- Use a **higher** speed for a **first look** at a document, and a slower speed to reread some or all of it (or the other way around)

- Use a **slower** speed when a document or issue is **important**, fascinating, or highly relevant to an ongoing project

- Use a **slower** speed when considering the **arguments** or gray areas of a document, and a higher speed when looking for concrete facts or examples

Caveat: Advanced readers know that **speedy-and-passive** reading can quickly turn into a mindless "making eye contact with each page" in a way that wastes time rather than saving it. But reading quickly while making active annotations (see "Active Reading" below) will help readers engage their critical thinking and leave a clear trail to return to later.

Advanced readers keep learning

Reading, like writing, is a skill that we develop over a lifetime. Being stumped by a new text isn't a sign of being a bad reader who should just give up. Advanced readers use a growth mindset, knowing that all readers can and must learn new reading approaches, especially:

- When moving to a new **genre**: reading a legal brief, client report, or

research poster will require different approaches from reading essays, while reading original church records from 1780 will require different strategies from reading a history textbook

- When moving to a new **field**: reading in economics will require different strategies from reading in history, conflict analysis, or cybersecurity
- When moving to a new **level**: reading advanced research or reports in your major or profession will often require different strategies from reading books or documents designed for novices
- When moving to a new **purpose**: reading to decide how to design the methods of a physical therapy study will require a different process than reading to understand the results that other studies have reported

Developing new reading approaches takes time, and advanced readers know we will often struggle or fail—or at least feel awkward—during the transition, but we aim always to learn from our failures and be persistent.

Focus on equity: Read to identify inclusion and exclusion

Sometimes excluding readers is rhetorical. Since it's beneficial for writers to adapt our message to meet the needs of a particular audience, we frequently provide less guidance for, or even assume we will antagonize, other readers. Advanced readers frequently encounter texts that were designed for someone else: when that happens, we can identify this kind of topic- or purpose-based exclusion, and consider how our reading experiences is affected by whether we are part of an author's primary audience. For instance, the author of a history of Mexico might simplify their focus to reach an audience of children, or emphasize events in one region to catch the interest of tourists, or include detailed references to scholarly arguments to help create new knowledge for professional historians.

In some cases, readers will only feel inconvenienced: we can all access the basic ideas of a children's book, even if it's not very exciting for adult readers, and we can still make out most of the scholarly history, though we won't understand (or perhaps be interested in) some of the arcane details. An author can write specifically toward one audience without discrediting, denigrating, or suppressing the perspectives of others.

However, since good writing is not neutral, the texts we read may be participating in a more destructive kind of exclusion linked to systemic discrimination or racism. As an active reader, you will want to stay aware of whether an individual text you are reviewing is excluding or suppressing the story of readers like you—or any other group of readers—either directly or implicitly. A text doesn't have to directly insult a group of people to exclude or harm them: when an author ignores a relevant perspective, especially in a context

where that perspective has historically been repressed or denied, the author is participating in a damaging pattern of discrimination and exclusion. When you read, you should thus consider whether a text makes exclusionary moves, such as:

- Use of unsubstantiated generalizations to characterize a group of people, either positively ("All Asian Americans study hard") or negatively ("Women are not fit for combat roles")

- Assumptions that the experiences of one group of people can represent the experiences of everyone (an article about vaccine resistance that primarily focuses on White, able-bodied people—or perhaps doesn't mention race or ability status at all)

- Omission of the experiences or perspectives of one or more relevant groups of people (an article on parenting that only describes mothers, or a book on marriage that refers only to heterosexual relationships)

- Representations of current practices or individual achievements that ignore a larger context of discrimination, suppression, or racism (a report on Ghanian electoral practices that doesn't address the effects of European colonization)

You can also step back and apply similar questions to a whole collection of texts: Do the posters and brochures at a technology fair primarily feature images of men? Are all of the credible secondary sources you gathered in your first round of research for your project on new developments in sustainable agriculture written by White authors? Do all of the textbooks for a management course focus on US businesses?

Finally, you might also consider whether a text, rather than making identifiable exclusionary moves, simply fails to take steps to represent deliberately inclusive discourse: a text in any field that fails to acknowledge that racism and other forms of discrimination have influenced and continue to influence events and opportunities can be questioned about its accuracy and its inclusiveness.

As with most questions about rhetoric, there are situations that ask readers to make complex judgments. The boundary between "appropriately narrow focus" and "discriminatory exclusion" can be difficult to pin down. For instance, how might critical readers respond differently to a political campaign advertisement that directly addresses and shows examples only of the majority middle-class White residents of a district, compared to one that features and focuses specifically on the needs of Latinx residents? How might readers from a range of backgrounds respond to a research study that focused primarily on the experiences of Tagalog speakers within a university community, if the authors directly acknowledged that additional similar studies should be conducted regarding speakers of other languages? Advanced readers don't shy away from these kinds

of conversations: asking questions and challenging assumptions is a productive way to resist discrimination.

If you find yourself reading a text that excludes, denigrates, or generalizes about a group of people that you personally identify with, you may have several reactions. If the exclusionary practices are too hurtful, you may need to stop reading and look for alternate ways to move your learning forward. You may make this decision on your own, or share your concerns with others. In other cases, you may find that you gain agency and confidence by identifying the harmful approaches as you read and talking back to them in your notes or draft writing, or even decide that you want to bring the problems to the notice of your peers, your instructor, or the audience of your writing project.

An advanced reader also pays careful attention to how a text includes or excludes other groups of people. As a White reader who is practicing anti-racism, or a straight reader aiming to be an ally to LGBTQ people, for example, you can take up the responsibility to identify and question any text that participates in the exclusion or denigration of other groups of people.

Either way, your primary goal is to notice the exclusion and carefully consider its effects on you and on other readers. In addition, you can learn to appreciate the strategies authors take to be deliberately inclusive: when you read a text by an author who deliberately includes data or perspectives from multiple groups of people, you might note your admiration for their efforts.

Finally, since advanced readers help to construct meaning and knowledge as we read, we need to check whether our own reading practices contribute to exclusion rather than inclusion. Readers are shaped by our culture and assumptions, and so as we read we might unconsciously do one or more of the following:

- Imagine that all of the people mentioned in a text are White, male, Christian, or heterosexual unless the text specifically says otherwise
- More strongly respect or believe authors or experts who are from one particular background rather than from others
- Assume that only one set of values described in a text is admirable, such as the independence, profit-making, or efficiency valued by White or Western cultures, when other values (interdependence, generosity, or connection) may be equally worthy
- Discount an experience or argument that is presented in language other than Standard Edited American English

As you improve your skills at anti-exclusionary reading practices, you will strengthen your critical reading abilities overall—and learn more about how to be a focused and yet also more inclusive, compassionate writer with your own projects.

Explore 6.2

What's one advanced reading strategy described in this chapter that you already use, or that you could easily try out in your next reading assignment? How do you think it helps (or could help) you as a reader? What's one strategy that you haven't used or that seems less relevant to you as a reader (why)? If there is another reading strategy you have heard about or used, briefly describe it and explain how it supports advanced reading.

6.2 Before You Read: Predict Problems and Opportunities

You already know that you can write better when you reflect to predict what will be difficult or easy problems to solve. Likewise, you can preview a text to know which elements of it could be most difficult—and how you will respond to those difficulties.

While you may remember some of these preview-and-predict strategies from your early school years, they aren't just for beginners. Accurately anticipating difficulty is a feature of experts in all fields: expert climbers can efficiently size up a rocky cliff and plot a path; expert bakers can tell you at a glance whether a recipe will take them ten minutes or an hour; expert pre-school teachers can pick out the two children who will probably be crankiest by the end of the morning and need more attention.

Moreover, three research-based principles of learning connect to using a pre-reading strategy:

- Learning works best when you engage in it at several points across time, with different contexts or approaches, rather than all at once (the "cramming" model sometimes feels like it works, but studies show otherwise).

- You will learn more successfully when you learn with a "mental model" of a concept, topic, or text in your head than when you try to learn blindly: we all retain new knowledge better when we connect it to a system of previous knowledge.

- Identifying and attempting to solve a problem—even before you have all the information necessary—can drastically improve your ability to fully solve it later on, even if you fail or have an incomplete solution the first time out.

Practice

- Studies show that expert readers benefit from using one or more of these **pre-reading** strategies, described in the following pages:
  - Create a **mental framework** for better comprehension and memory.

> ## Practice (continued)
>
>   - **Predict your speed** and mental approach to improve efficiency and engagement.
>   - **Connect your experiences** and prior knowledge to improve motivation and memory.
>   - **Predict the content** to improve attention and critical thinking.
>   - **Identify your questions** to gain purpose and improve focus.
> - These strategies can take as little as five minutes for a straightforward reading project or as long as fifteen or twenty minutes for a long text. Whenever possible, you should write down what you think or discover, including notes you make directly on the text.

Create a mental framework for better comprehension and memory

When you read a mystery novel or watch a horror movie, you want to be surprised. On the other hand, when you read a difficult text, "spoilers" actually work to your advantage, so that you can see where you're going and how to get there most effectively. You can think of this as reading with a map; scholars often talk about this situation as having a schema or mental model. When a text matches your expectations—when it fits your model—rather than surprises or confuses you, you learn more from it.

Scan key features. Before you start to read, survey the text to discover its basic content, structure, arguments, and value. Remember that you are not reading the whole text, but using a calculated skimming process focused on the text's key features. In a typical academic or professional text-based document, these features might include:

- The title, author's name, and publication information
- The opening paragraph or abstract
- Any sub-titles or section headers—or the first sentence or two of any paragraph that seems suddenly to have switched topics
- Any charts, tables, pictures with captions, or graphs
- The final paragraph or two

In other genres, you might look for alternate features: skimming the headers and menus of a webpage, looking at the top and bottom of a poster where key information often resides, or checking over the charts or appendices of a report.

Write brief answers. Your goal is to be able to identify and write down several key "big picture" items, so that when you see the smaller details, you know how they fit. You could set a goal of writing answers to at least five of the following questions:

- What is the author's **main point**, clarification, or argument?
- What are some of the **sub-points or key examples** that the author discusses?
- Do you see any **alternative** ideas or counterarguments?
- Who do you think is the author's **primary audience**—does it include you? (Consider the author's terminology and examples: to whom are they accessible and relevant?)
- What do you know about the **genre** or style of this text that will help you understand where and how the author will present his/her ideas?
- What part(s) of the text seem most **familiar**, and what part(s) seem new or difficult?
- How will you most likely **connect** with or use this text in your assignments, courses, or workplace?

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have difficulty with _____ as I read; if that happens, I could _____."

Your answers to the questions above will provide you with your basic map or schema of the text, and of your goals and challenges in reading it. That way, even if you don't quite understand an example or explanation, you can still make sense of it in light of the author's larger goals.

Predict your speed and mental approach to improve efficiency and engagement

Just there is no one kind of "good writing," there is no one kind of "good reading": readers adapt the process of "reading" to match each situation. You should never assume that the best way to read a text is to start at the beginning, read everything as fast as possible, and take notes on all the ideas. The more you can adapt your reading strategies to fit the situation, the more efficient, effective, and enjoyable your reading time will become.

Before you start to read, take five minutes to scan your text and check your own goals to decide on a reasonable speed, approach, and attitude to bring to this reading task.

Scan to predict your speed. You should scan your text and check your own goals to decide whether you should read more quickly, aiming to get "the general idea" of a text, or more slowly to engage thoughtfully with the arguments and nuances.

Read more quickly for general overview if:

- The text is about familiar topics and in a familiar genre.
- You are motivated, rested, and focused, so you will likely learn key ideas easily.

- The text is mostly unrelated to your overall purpose, and you are scanning for a few relevant points.

- The text is written for a much more specialized audience, and you are skimming to see if a few points seem comprehensible or useful.

- The text looks difficult or important, so you plan to read it a second time once you have a better sense of its structure and focus.

Read more slowly for arguments and data if:

- The topic or genre of the text is unfamiliar to you.

- The author of the text is arguing or analyzing complicated points in depth.

- You are unmotivated, tired, or feeling distracted, so that you need to work harder to learn key ideas.

- You need to be able to comprehend the issues in detail or explain them to someone else.

- The text is central to your goals or projects, and you will need to refer frequently to its ideas or information.

- The text is well matched to your ability level so that "one good reading" done thoughtfully and thoroughly will meet your needs.

Sometimes, a single text will need two speeds:

- Although it may seem odd, you might be most efficient with a complex or important text if you read it twice: once quickly to see what the structure and key ideas are, and once slowly to wrestle with the data and arguments.

- In a long text, you may need to adapt your reading speed as you go: you might identify a straightforward background section where you can read quickly, and a section full of data and arguments that you should read more slowly.

Scan to predict your intensity. You should also decide whether you need to read intensely without distractions, or if you can take some breaks or handle some background interference. Be cautious about granting yourself more distractions: despite what you may think about your ability to skim effectively and multitask while you read, research reveals that even advanced readers benefit from doing some reading in a focused, uninterrupted approach—especially reading that is challenging or important to us.

Perhaps having a little quiet music makes you comfortable which helps your motivation. However, you'll finish a complex reading task faster and with more accuracy if you plan your distractions—say, using a timer to give yourself a clean five-minute break every twenty-five minutes to take a walk (and check your

messages)—than if you shift your attention every time a buzzer or flashing notification goes off. You may need some time to get used to a "focus hard, relax hard" approach to reading, but it will pay off.

Scan to predict your mental approach. Reading without a clear purpose is a bit like going to MegaMart without a shopping list: it's easy to get overwhelmed and then to forget what you came for. Your goal is always to read actively, but depending on your purposes, you may use an intensive approach or a less formal approach to interacting with the text. Review the chart below and identify whether you should be leaning more toward intensive or informal engagement with the text.

Take shorter or more informal notes as you read if:

- You are reading primarily to find out basic facts.
- You will be able to refer back to this text later.
- You need to understand just the ideas in this one text.
- You need a "big picture" understanding of this issue or text right now.
- You mostly need to demonstrate that you are aware of key ideas discussed in this text.
- Your readers will not find the ideas in this text or about this issue challenging or controversial.

Take more intensive and thorough notes as you read if:

- You are reading to understand arguments, causes, connections, or implications.
- You need to commit this information to memory for use in an exam or daily job performance.
- You need to draw connections to other texts, to theories/concepts, or to "real life" issues.
- You need to understand the details, data, and/or complex analyses of the issue or text.
- You will be expected to evaluate, analyze, judge, or even improve upon the text's ideas.
- You will need to use ideas or examples in this text to persuade readers about a highly debatable argument or plan.

Write out your plan. You can draft your adaptive reading plan as a single sentence: "I think that because this text is [key feature or features] and my main goal in reading it is [goal], it is therefore [more/less] complex and [more/less] important to me than average, and I plan to read it with [high/low] speed, [some/no] distractions, and [extensive/informal] notetaking."

Connect your experiences and prior knowledge to improve motivation and memory

All learners retain new knowledge by connecting it to what we already know. The more vividly you can create a mental model that includes what you might encounter and learn from your upcoming reading, and links this topic to memories or concepts you are already familiar with, the more likely you will be to comprehend, engage with, and remember what you read.

When you write about connections like these before you read, you activate your prior memories to provide precise context to help you learn. You may also discover more reasons to be interested in and motivated to read the text, and you will energize your own voice, setting yourself up as a conversational partner with the author of the text.

Write your personal connections. Write for 3-5 minutes drawing specific connections to this text, looking for ways to note down exactly what information, situations, or questions you see as related:

- What are several things you already know about the topic the author is writing about, from your personal experiences?
- What do you already know about this text or issue based on other texts you have read, recently or in the past?
- What "cousin topics"—ideas related to this issue—do you know about and what is your opinion about those associated ideas?

Write your topic connections. If you know a little bit about the topic of the text and you want to stretch your brain, you can try a set of six connections called cubing:

- *Describe* the key features of the core topic.
- *Compare* the core topic to a situation or event you think it most resembles.
- *Associate* the topic with something a little different in your own life that it somehow reminds you of.
- *Analyze* it by explaining any of the parts, steps, pieces, or factors you know of.
- *Apply* the main concept: how might actual people you know be involved or affected?
- *Agree or disagree* with some element, or explain how it will or will not work in a given situation that you're familiar with.

If you get stuck on any of these connections, you can skip it and go to the next one.

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have difficulty connecting with _____ as I read; if that happens, I could _____."

Predict the content to improve attention and critical thinking

Advanced readers don't just read what's in front of them; like top sports players, debaters, race car drivers, and jazz band members, we try to anticipate what will happen before it occurs. When you dive into the problem at the center of a text and attempt to solve it, you are using your highest critical thinking skills. Research shows that even if you guess wrong, you will learn more from trying and failing than if you had just started reading the text—and you will likely increase your engagement.

Your predictions will not only provide you with a possible map or schema of the text; they help you think like a writer who is part of the conversation. When your guesses match the author's moves, you'll know not just what they are saying but why. When the text differs from your predictions, you can gain awareness of another author's choices about organization, argument and evidence.

Skim for content clues. Quickly skim the title, first and last paragraphs, and any subheadings in your document. What did you learn about the author's main topics, arguments, or examples?

Write your content predictions. Then write to answer at least 4-5 of the questions below, predicting what the author might write about, and how.

- What core ideas, and what two or three other sub-issues, do you think this text will address?
- What genre is the author writing in, and what approaches or sections will he/she likely include?
- What questions will the author need to answer in order to satisfy readers?
- What kinds of evidence will he or she likely use to provide credible answers?
- What alternatives or counterarguments do you expect the author to address?
- What wild-and-crazy idea might this author come up with, or what might the author dig down and spend a whole lot of time giving incredibly specific details on?

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have trouble understanding or connecting with information about _____ as I read; if that happens, I could _____."

Identify your questions to gain purpose and improve focus

Perhaps you believe you have no way to connect with or predict the content of a text, and your survey still leaves you confused. Or perhaps you have limited time and energy to spend reading, and you want to stay clearly focused on your goals. In either case, you can begin with your questions.

When you orient your brain toward questions related to this text, you turn yourself into the kind of reader the author was hoping for: someone who is ready to participate in a conversation about this issue. You raise your awareness of key issues—including complicated *how* and *why* arguments—so that you will stay focused and see them when they arise.

You can start your list with fact-based questions, and then move to questions about the author's judgments or analysis. You should try to list at least 4-6 questions, so that you get beyond obvious ideas and into more precise or challenging goals:

- What background information, past histories, or definitions do you need to know?

- What do you need to know about names and dates, amounts and sizes, durations and growth rates, or other statistics?

- What do you need to know about causes and effects, about the steps involved, about how one thing leads to another?

- What do you need to know about the best or worst factors, or about the most or least effective approaches?

- What do you need to know about solutions or actions to take?

- What do you need to know about alternatives, complications, or resisting arguments?

- What other questions do you have that could begin with "How does _____?" or "Why is _____?" or "But isn't it also true that _____?"

Finish with an adaptation plan sentence: "I might have difficulty with _____ as I read; if that happens, I could _____."

Explore 6.3

Pre-reading strategies don't have to take a lot of time. Set a timer for 10 minutes. Choose one of the "before" strategies listed in this chapter, and apply it to an upcoming reading assignment. If you finish early, add a note: how long did it take you? If the timer goes off before you finish, you can simply stop and add a note: "Stopped here after 10 minutes."

6.3 As You Read: Comprehend, Connect, Analyze, and Respond

You may already use one or two strategies while you read, such as highlighting text or writing notes in a document or on notecards. These are primarily summary strategies, and they are often passive: you may briefly identify what the text says without analyzing, evaluating, questioning, or connecting with it.

In order to improve as an advanced reader, you need to create a plan that includes active strategies to help you read conversationally and rhetorically. You won't just make notes about core ideas, but you will also draw connections, analyze claims and evidence, predict links to your writing project, sketch out counterarguments or concerns, and thus stay engaged and focused in the reading process. The strategies below require you to go beyond highlighting to writing actual words while you read—sometimes in very short phrases, sometimes by pausing for a longer break—so that you:

- Increase your comprehension and memory of what you read
- Deepen your interpretive understanding
- Prepare to apply knowledge to your writing project
- Practice recalling ideas to strengthen your working memory
- Leave a record of key ideas to consult at a later time
- Stay focused and engaged so you save time
- Expand your own repertoire as a writer

When you are reading a printed text that you own, you should use a pen or pencil (not just a highlighter!) and write directly on the text: underlining and circling phrases for emphasis, writing comments in the margins as you go. If you do not own the text, you should still look for ways to write directly on it: you might make photocopies or use sticky notes to aid your note-taking. Alternately, you may be able to download, paste, photograph, or scan the text to create a document-based or PDF copy into which you can insert visual or audio notes using your computer, phone, or tablet.

Once you get used to it, actively writing on the text as you read can be:

- **Fast**, because your eyes and hands do not leave the page
- **Organized**, because your notes are always connected with the text itself, not lost on a shelf or buried in a file somewhere
- **Ethical**, because you will always be able to see which language is yours and which is the original author's wording
- **Conversational**, because you will gain the sense of "talking back" to the text in the time and space

As you read, you might also complete some exploratory or reflective writing separate from the text. But on-text notations are the quickest way to move your brain into active reading strategies. After reviewing some of the options below, you should set a goal to become comfortable with one or two active reading-and-annotating approaches, so that you can improve your engagement and efficacy as a reader. (Note: You can also use these strategies to review a written draft of a project that you or your peer has composed!)

Practice

- Advanced readers often adopt one or more of these **active reading** strategies to use as they engage with a text; see more information in the pages that follow:
    - **Annotate** to engage with and keep track of key ideas.
    - Write out **snapshots** to improve your memory and understanding.
    - **Outline** to map a text's arguments and evidence.
    - **Talk back** to engage with a controversial text.

Annotate to engage with and keep track of key ideas

To annotate a text as an advanced reader, you need to write actual words, using a pen, pencil, or keyboard, not simply a highlighter. All a highlighter can do is say "Hey!" or "I was here!" in a single mode: that's not a conversation, and it provides no analysis.

You can stay with just *reactions*, and still provide more variety and intelligence to your conversation. For instance, you can decide right now that your single underline means "I was here," your double underline means "I was here and I was impressed," and your wavy underline means "I was here and I was doubtful": without taking any more time than using a highlighter, you've already added analysis to your notation. (What might you mean by circling vs. boxing specific phrases?)

Or you can write out the word "Hey!" and begin to vary it. Again, without taking much more of your time, you could instead write one of the following reactions, each of which can reveal a different category of intelligent commentary:

> Ha.
>
> Heh.
>
> Hee.
>
> Hooboy!
>
> Hmm.
>
> Hmph.
>
> Huh?
>
> Whoa!

Now, instead of a pile of Hey!, you have a text full of notes that put you into at least a basic conversation with the author. You have to challenge yourself to decide whether you are thinking, "Hey, this is fascinating!" or "Hey, this is fishy."

You can add other reactions as well, in short phrases or abbreviations ("fab. arg." or "OMG TMI") that you'll understand.

In addition to your reactions, you can and should:

- **Ask quick questions**: these can be factual questions ("how cold was it?") as well as interpretive ones ("why weren't they prosecuted?").
- **Draw connections**: you can link what you see to your life ("just like my cousin") or to something else you have read or studied ("just like Romeo").
- **Agree or disagree** with what you read and note down why: "that makes sense because ___" or "that's too expensive due to ___."
- **Swiftly summarize** major points: even if you're not formally doing a "Snapshots" strategy, you can write a three- or four-word summary of a major point ("four reasons to save money for college") every few pages, especially in a long text, to keep yourself focused and provide an easy way to find those points if you need to review the text.
- **Map key arguments**: even if you're not formally doing an "Outline" strategy, you can try to identify moments where the author is addressing a new angle ("Big Point #2: Costs") so that you keep track of the rhetorical patterns and can find them again when you come back to the text.

Remember that you are trying to keep up an efficient reading speed rather than write extensive notes.

At first, annotating may slow you down somewhat as you start to pay attention not just to the text but to your own responses, questions, and theories. You will also need to take time to decide what to annotate: if you comment on everything, then nothing will stand out as important. So as you start, you might set a goal of reading two or three paragraphs, pausing, and then deciding what one or two comments you most want to make about them are.

Eventually, though, annotation will save you time: when you annotate, you stay engaged so your reading speed and comprehension improve; you involve your higher brain in a conversation, so your understanding and memory improve; and you leave a clear record of your thinking (not just your existence) that you can go back to and quickly apply to your next project.

Take snapshots to improve your memory and understanding

When you go on a trip, you might take snapshot pictures of the most important or impressive sights along the way. You can do the same thing as you read. Snapshots are a specific kind of annotation, in which you emphasize writing short summaries only: this is less conversational and more intensely information-focused than other annotation strategies.

To read in snapshot mode, you need to get into a rhythm—read, pause, comment—the way you might ride on a tour bus, listen to the guide, snap a picture, and then move on. After every couple of paragraphs, or every page or two of a longer document, you should stop and compose a short summary—no longer than five or six words, if possible. You might write, "Information about better camping spots," or "Doxtader vs. Armin on water rights," or "Why attack ads work." If you don't quite know what you've just been reading, that's ok: your snapshot can be blurry, such as "Something about differential pricing."

Try at first to write your snapshots *without looking back at the text*: this is a way of testing your comprehension. When you struggle to recall what you've just read, you actually help create the neural pathways to strengthen your memory. If you find that you truly don't remember the key points clearly enough to restate them, then you can look back—but take that as a sign that you may need to slow your reading speed and/or read in smaller chunks before taking another snapshot.

When you're reading a challenging text, you may find both that trying to simplify half a page of reading into a six-word summary is more difficult than you expect, and that the act of trying to do so helps you figure out what you understand and what you're stuck on. Not only will you have a better set of notes to refer back to, but you should reach the end of the text with a stronger memory of what you read, because you've already translated its key points into your own words.

Outline to map a text's arguments and evidence

In the same way that sports competitors analyze their opponents' strategies and moves, you can engage in a reading problem by focusing primarily on how the author is structuring his or her argument. Outlining as you read (a technique sometimes called "reverse outlining" since some people think of "true" outlining as a strategy that should only happen before a text gets written) is a specific kind of annotation in which you emphasize identifying the author's argument and evidence structure. You focus less on your response, but you become more prepared to respond by knowing how the author has set out the opening moves.

To read in outline mode, get into a rhythm of reading, pausing, commenting, and sometimes moving backward or forward to check, add to, or revise your other comments. Sometimes even very advanced readers can't tell whether what we've just read is a major argument or just another example until we've read further along.

When you read to outline, you may want to write notes when you see the following kinds of elements in a text:

- Overall statement of **argument or purpose** (sometimes presented as a thesis or research question)
- **Background** information or review of previous research

- Each main **sub-point**, sub-claim, step, or recommendation
- For each sub-point, a note about the key **evidence**: any separate extended example, collection of data points, or part of a narrative
- Any discussion of **alternative** views, opposing arguments, or outlying data
- Any **refutation** of or response to opposing arguments or outlying data
- Any elements that seem **unrelated** or off exploring a tangent
- The final **concluding** statements and reasons

Your notes do not need to follow the strict format of a formal outline, with A's and B's and 1's and 2's. Yet you should leave yourself enough information that you could create that kind of outline if you needed to. So you could write short comments such as, "Sub-point: Not all local food = organic," and "Sub-point: Not all local food = good farm techniques" and "Example: Fruit trees fail w/o pesticides." You might decide later that the author considered these as one overall issue, and go back and add a note: "Big-sub-point: Not all local food = good for environment."

Reading and outlining will probably take longer than reading straight through. However, if your goal is to understand the author's argument or to respond with an argument of your own, your investment will pay off. By sketching a map of how the author constructs their argument, you will understand both the content and the logic of the text better.

Talk back to engage with a controversial text

If you've ever asked a friend to talk to you so you can stay awake on a long drive, or you're the kind of person who sometimes yells at the television during an exciting match or annoying show, you understand some of the value of talking back. It can be energizing to get caught up in a conversation, even with an inanimate object. Conversing with a text as you read uses the same strategies as the other annotation modes discussed here, but focuses your attention on personal response and connection—especially critical response—rather than on mastering the content or structure of the text.

To read in talkback mode, you need to be ready to "hear" precise pieces of what the author has put on the page, and then "talk back" as specifically and energetically as possible. You might start by underlining and/or circling parts of sentences, to help you focus on the author's exact words: "I see this is what you say here." Pause a minute: what exactly do you think? What memory has surfaced? How confused, frustrated, or opposed are you, and why?

Then write a short note that helps you join this conversation:

- **Connect**: what exact ideas or images have the author's words sparked in your own mind?

- **Question**: what did the author leave out, or what other concerns do you have right now?
- **Resist**: what skeptical, curious, doubting, disagreeing, or contradictory responses have those words produced?
- **Personalize**: access your own brain by using first-person frames ("I think that . . ." or "This makes me feel . . ." or "One time I tried . . .").

Remember: you don't want to repeat or translate what the author said ("Here I think you mean X"); you don't want to spend all day going off on a rant; you don't want to write a generic comment that anyone else could write. Instead, you want to create a short comment that proves you—precisely you and nobody else—were there having a response to the author's ideas, arguments, evidence, structure, or style.

You don't always have to be doubtful or grumpy in your talkback; you can also note where you agree with or connect to the author's ideas. But when you take a more critical talkback attitude, playing the role of someone full of questions (or someone who yells "Get off my lawn!" to every passing kid), it sometimes helps keep the reading interesting and helps you remember what you learn.

Read critically to check everyone's assumptions

When instructors say they want you to analyze a text, dig for its "deeper meaning," or "read critically," often they mean you should address an author's logic or their argument backstory: the assumptions they hold that are not always stated but affect what they include, omit, or emphasize. Most authors are not trying to deceive readers, so you're not looking for a "hidden" meaning—but as a writer, you know that writers don't always reveal everything they think or assume. To explain more clearly why an author's reasoning is solid or flawed, you can:

- **Consider what's emphasized or overlooked**: is the author addressing a diverse range of people and situations, or have they left out a key perspective, consequence, or opportunity?
- **Identify oversimplification**: does the author adequately address complications and resistances, or do they present a quick scenario or solution that doesn't match a more intricate problem?
- **Call out biases**: if an author's stance or argument doesn't have strong reasoning, evidence, or consideration of alternatives, perhaps the author is caught up in a significant personal or professional bias.
- **Check for faulty logic**: in everyday communication, we are all susceptible to using generalizations or unsupported claims about causes or consequences, but you can hold writers to a high standard.

Beyond just "talking back" with your own questions or concerns, reading with an assumption-checking mindset means alternating between reading and thinking.

So after you read a few paragraphs or pages, pause a minute and ask a question about the author's focus, emphasis, or evidence. Then write a note about any pattern you want to investigate further: "This author is emphasizing ___ but they might be overlooking/assuming ____ ."

Read actively and closely to spot nuances

You have probably had lots of experience using a "close reading" approach to analyze poetry and fiction. You can use similar approaches—focusing on how individual word choices and language patterns contribute to the meaning of a text—when reading and writing about nonfiction texts.

Even for "ordinary" writing like textbooks, news reports, and scholarly studies, you can pay attention to specific words and phrases: these can help you:

- **Determine the target audience**. An author's diction—where do they use descriptive, technical, or antagonistic language?—can help you decide who they are writing to.

- **Identify the author's stance**. Individual words can convey more or less enthusiasm, openness, or certainty about their own or others' arguments.

- **Track main points and examples**. Transition words and phrases are crucial for distinguishing an author's argument from their examples, and help you follow counterarguments and refutations.

- **Select and explain direct quotations** from an author in your own writing. When you're limiting your quotation length to avoid interruption of your voice, you should pick phrases that give an author's distinct argument in vivid language, and perhaps even explain how a particular word you've quoted connects to your own point.

In close-reading mode, use your annotations to focus on specific words or phrases that help you focus on the author's best or most challenging ideas, or points that relate to or conflict with your current arguments. Don't just highlight or underline these words: use color-coding, short reactions, or brief questions or phrases to help you remember why *these words* had such an impact.

Explore 6.4

Choose one of the "as you read" strategies listed in this chapter, and apply it to *just the first three pages / 1000 words* of a reading assignment you are starting. You should aim to add at least 1-2 comments per page. Pause at the end of the third page and reflect: what effect do you think this strategy had on your *engagement* with the material, your *memory* of what you read, and/or the *speed* of your reading? Write a final note on this page about at least one of these factors: did it improve, stay the same, or get worse?

6.4 After You Read: Consolidate Your Understanding

Most readers are so glad to complete a difficult reading task that we set down the book, toss away the pages, or turn off the screen with a sigh and turn to the next task (or reach for our nearest device to check our messages and likes). Yet from a problem-solving perspective, that's like turning away just ten minutes' hike from the top of a mountain peak, or leaving a concert just before the band plays their best song.

If you get into the habit instead of taking just five or ten minutes to work on one more task right when you finish reading, you can capture the last of your reading momentum and turn it to your advantage. Depending on the strategy you choose, you can:

- Preserve what you already know
- Increase your comprehension and memory of the text
- Create a mental model of the issue you are studying
- And/or expand your awareness of the strategies the author is using so that you can improve your own writing.

Many students have gotten used to relying on a strategy of "take notes now, re-read and study those notes later (right before an exam or project)." However, research shows that readers remember and understand significantly more when we:

- First try recalling key information immediately after we finish reading
- Try recalling information without re-reading the text or notes
- Translate what we recall into our own words
- Check to make sure we have recalled accurately
- Repeat this recall-and-check process a few times

Instead of spending hours and hours a week or two later ineffectively scanning a bunch of highlighted pages that repetitively say "Hey! Hey! Hey!," you should take time right when you finish to consolidate what you know. Studies using brain imaging show that making a deliberate effort to recall information actually re-encodes the information from your short-term neurons to your long-term neurons: you physically rewire your own brain.

You can use your "after" strategies *immediately* after reading and/or as a *delayed* strategy after reading. Both of those approaches have advantages.

- When you employ an "after" strategy immediately after reading a text, you take advantage of the most complete, freshest understanding of it that you are likely to have. In addition, you capture the momentum of your current working time: you won't "forget" to come back and do this task.

- When you use an "after" strategy a few days later, using a delayed approach, you will need to struggle to recall what you have read because it isn't as fresh—which will cause you to imprint what you do recall much more firmly in your brain. In addition, you might be a little less tired or distracted when you return to the reading, and so you might think of connections that wouldn't have occurred to you before.

For best results—especially on a text that is particularly difficult or particularly important—you can do both a short "after" strategy immediately when you finish, and a delayed strategy a day later, for maximum understanding and remembering of an important text. Researchers show that readers who use these two strategies together do not need to re-read or review the text in any other way to improve recall: we do not have any additional memory gains from re-reading the text, from staring at all that highlighting, or from skimming all our notes. You might still choose to reread a text to improve your understanding of complex ideas, but not because you've forgotten what you read.

Remember that post-reading strategies involve three key approaches:

- **Recall** what you can without looking back at the text: The struggle to remember is crucial in alerting your brain that you want to remember.
- **Restate in writing** what you remember or value in your own words: Even if your version is incomplete or vaguely phrased, the writing keeps you honest and helps you create new knowledge for yourself. For further emphasis, consider reorganizing the document's ideas using your own priorities or categories.
- **Check your accuracy** after you write: You should take a few minutes to glance back at the text to be sure you didn't alter or omit a key element (it's good to guess first, but you don't want to leave with a false impression). When you correct your own answers, rather than just looking over what the original text said, you increase the likelihood that you will accurately remember and comprehend what you read.

Once you have consolidated your learning—and you've checked to make sure your consolidation is accurate—then your review and studying can focus on your consolidation notes and occasionally checking for a specific fact or quotation.

The strategies below save time and increase your intelligence and engagement. Even—or perhaps especially—if you are pressed for time, or if you are frustrated by the difficulty or dullness of the reading task, you should plan to do at least a few minutes' worth of consolidation using one of the strategies below before you set the text aside. As a frustrated reader, you really don't want to waste any momentum you might have on your side.

Finally, remember that when you are writing about what you read, you are moving back into the work of knowledge creation: your post-reading tasks turn your reading momentum into writing momentum that carries you back toward your major project.

> ## Practice
>
> - Advanced readers often use one of the following **post-reading** strategies to help consolidate understanding; see the following pages for more details:
>   - **Five-sentence summary**: Understand, recall, and restate key arguments
>   - **Ten questions**: Test your understanding and memory of complex ideas
>   - **Difficulty detective**: Analyze complex ideas and deepen your thinking
>   - **Concept map**: Visualize key concepts, connections, and applications
>   - **DIY discussion questions**: Recall complexities and continue the conversation

NOTE: Most of the writing you do after you read will be in notes that are separate from the text itself. You will need to take some specific steps to be sure that you can benefit from this writing now and at a later point.

- **Identify your notes.** Include the author, title, and source or URL of the reading you're doing, as well as the date you're writing—and store them somewhere you can find them again.

- **Relax your style.** This is low-stakes, writing-to-learn writing. Try not to worry about being grammatically correct or getting the precise wording. Skip steps or change the order of steps if necessary to keep up a good pace so that you don't get frustrated.

- **Acknowledge someone else's words.** If you copy out any words or phrases directly from the text, vividly indicate to yourself that you have done this, and note the page number if that's relevant. Decide how you will make this distinction absolutely obvious to yourself so you don't commit a citation error: if simple quotation marks are not dramatic enough, you might also need boxes, underlines, asterisks, emojis, or another font type or color.

Five-sentence summary: Understand, recall, and restate key arguments

Recall: Summarizing a text—remembering its main points and putting them entirely in your own words—is a standard technique both for readers who want to remember information and writers who want to share it. A summary is not particularly conversational, since you need to avoid judging the text. In a summary, you should not indicate whether you believe an argument or example is

persuasive or accurate. But a summary is rhetorical, since in your very first step you seek to identify not just random facts, but the author's overall argument and structure.

Restate and Write: You can create your summary freeform, or use a list, plan, or format to help you. The guide below challenges you to select only the most important sub-points and evidence; in the process of writing such a summary, you must put together the whole text in your mind and try to see it from the author's point of view, as a series of strategic elements.

- Summary sentence 1 gives the main idea: State the author's overall goal, argument, or conclusion. Do not simply describe the topic or issue that the text was "about," but explain what the point was, what the author intended to change or emphasize by writing it. "Author X argues that _____."
- Sentences 2 and 3 give the structure: Describe the author's main sub-points, in the order they were presented.
- Sentence 4 identifies some of the support: Describe at least one key example the author uses to support his/her argument.
- Sentence 5 notes the larger conversation: Describe a counterargument the author notes and refutes, a secondary issue the author suggests is connected, a related conversation that the author connects this discussion to, or a larger implication that the author sees that makes the issue important to address.

You can always write a longer or shorter summary, or a summary that focuses on different aspects of the text: its key facts or data, its methodology, its connections to other texts you've read, its most interesting or controversial points, or its most relevant thematic issues.

Check for accuracy: When you've completed your summary, you should check back—or check with a peer or instructor—to make sure that it is as accurate as possible. Are you sure you stated the author's overall belief or position, rather than just the general topic or a minor idea? (Check the opening and closing sections of the text for confirmation.) Did you leave out anything important? Did you insert any judgments of your own ("this is a *great* point!") that you need to take out so that your summary is objective? Modify your summary if you need to.

Ten questions: Test your understanding and memory of complex ideas

A five-sentence summary may not go far enough in helping you comprehend the main information or core strategies used in the text you just read. Also, you may want to include your own judgments and analysis of how well a text is communicating with you as a reader. If so, you can challenge yourself to answer additional

questions about an important text, or get into a pattern of answering key questions about any text you review.

Recall: Choose one of the question sets below, a list of questions your instructor has given you, or a list of questions that you know will help you recall and organize key information about what you've just read. For each question, think back over the whole text, and try to identify a strong, specific answer. If you're not sure, go ahead and consider what answers might be possible: remember that trying and failing to recall is still an effective comprehension and memory strategy.

Restate and Write: List your answers to the questions, using as much exact detail as you can recall. You may need longer answers (a sentence or two) for some of the questions.

Content Questions: What It Says: Use these questions to boost information recall

1. What is the exact topic of this text? (If you can, try to include a "How ___" or "Why ___" or "The ways that ___" explanation rather than just a noun such as "voting rights" or "social media.")
2. What is the author's main argument, point, or key piece of information: how do they want to alter the reader's thinking or behavior?
3. What was one significant sub-point that the author made?
4. What data, example, or explanation did the text provide about that sub-point?
5. What was another significant sub-point that the author made?
6. What data, example, or explanation did the text provide about that second sub-point?
7. What information did the text include in order to address complications, alternatives, questions, or resistances?
8. What information, examples, or explanations surprised you or left you with questions? How so?
9. What connections did the text draw to other sources, conversations, experts, or issues?
10. What final conclusions, recommendations, or arguments did the author provide?

Strategy Questions: What It Does: Use these questions to improve analysis and gain a writer's perspective

1. What is the author's main argument, point, or key piece of information: is it a debatable claim or mostly just facts and description, and how does he/she want to alter the reader's thinking or behavior?
2. Where and how does the author present this argument: early in the text or later? Stated directly or leaving it for readers to discover by implication?

3. Who is in the author's main/target audience, and who is not? (Are you? What are two clues that help you decide?)

4. List two or three author sub-points in order, and explain why you think they are ordered that way—is the first one earlier in time, necessary as background for the others, easier to understand, or important for getting readers' attention?

5. Is the author supporting their claims mostly with personal analysis, factual observation, connections from outside sources? (Give an example if you can.)

6. What if any quantitative evidence (numerical data) does the author provide, and is it effective? (Give an example if you can.)

7. What if any qualitative evidence (stories, testimony, descriptions) does the author provide, and is it effective? (Give an example if you can.)

8. How does the author address complications, alternatives, questions, or resources—are they considered throughout the text or in just one section? Does the author provide convincing responses?

9. How well does the content of this text (arguments, evidence, analysis) engage and influence the author's primary readers? (Give an example if you can.)

10. How well do the author's genre or style choices (organization, diction, layout) engage and influence the author's primary readers? (Give an example if you can.)

Check your accuracy: Check back with the text and update your notes to make sure that your answers are as accurate as possible. Did you remember correctly what the key points of the text were? Did you leave out an example that you want to recall later? Is there an additional direct quotation that you want to add to show precisely what the author was doing? Adapt any answers that were incorrect or incomplete.

When you use a template or heuristic like these ten questions rather than just trying to recall a few facts on your own, you challenge your memory and reasoning to perform at a high level. When you use a pattern like this repeatedly, you can start to retrain your brain so that you automatically look for the important elements of a text as you read.

Difficulty detective: Analyze complex ideas and deepen your thinking

Researchers report that one way to identify experts is that they head directly toward difficult spots and seek out challenges in a field, subject, or task, while novices steer away from difficulties. Whatever you feel confident and interested in—a class in school, a kind of online game, a type of music or sport—you probably

enjoy it more when something is surprising, puzzling, or challenging rather than a typical everyday experience.

Even if you're not feeling very knowledgeable, you can act like an expert by heading back toward the most difficult part of what you've just read and diving right back in for a few minutes. The trick is not to try to understand this part of the reading perfectly, but to become a "difficulty detective": to try to figure out what makes it so hard.

Recall: Think back (or take a quick look) and choose at least one passage, sub-issue, or section of the text that you had trouble understanding, following, remembering, or believing. This could be just a paragraph or two, or it could be as much as a few pages. Perhaps the jargon was pretty dense, or perhaps the argument got tangled up, or perhaps it was just page seventeen and you were getting pretty tired of it all. Begin by defining what you will be investigating: "I had more difficulty than usual trying to understand, connect with, or remember the section where the author writes about _____."

Restate and Write: Then write for several minutes, without looking back at the text, focusing on the problem rather than the data. You should suggest your best theories about why this section was difficult for you to read, using approaches like those noted here:

- Identify the source of difficulty: do you think you had problems in comprehension, in interpretation, or in seeing a clear application of or connection to the text?
- Balance it out: if you think you understand some parts of the section better than others, say so.
- Recall exact factors: do you think your difficulties arose because of language or terminology, because of the structure of the text, because of the complexity or intensity of the ideas, and/or because of your lack of background knowledge about the main issues?
- Compare: what do you think made this section more difficult than other parts of the text, or more difficult than other texts you've read recently?
- Investigate yourself: is there anything in your own background that helps explain why it makes sense that you were not fully prepared to understand this passage?
- Problem-solve: if you were going to read a passage like this again, what might help you—in support from the author, or additional information or background from other sources—to solve reading problems in that situation?

Offer all of your theories, even if they seem unlikely or contradictory. You don't

have to understand everything you read to become a better reader: you are using this model to help you gain more control.

Check accuracy: Now that you have a name for the difficulties, take two minutes to glance back at the section. What other details can you add to show precisely what was difficult? What sentences or phrasings can you see now that might help you explain more about the difficulty of this text?

Sometimes this "move toward difficulty" approach allows you the opportunity to solve (part of) a problem, and sometimes it allows you to realize that you were facing a problem you weren't likely to solve—not because you're a bad reader, but because the gap between your knowledge and what the author expects their readers to know is too wide. Either way, you learn more about the text and gain confidence in your own abilities as an advanced reader.

Concept map: Visualize key concepts, connections, and applications

Sometimes you can understand a word-based text better when you shift to a diagram or map. If you have been outlining or taking snapshots of your text as you go along, you may already have a series of small notes that are ready to be assembled—literally—into a "bigger picture."

Recall, restate, and organize: Without looking back at the text, you can begin your sketch on a piece of paper, using circles and connecting lines, or use shapes and lines in a document on screen.

- **Map the core.** Start by naming and sketching the key point and at least two or three major concepts of the text you just read. If you'd like your map to include visual features such as hills and lakes, roads and houses, planets and moons, or even just different fonts and colors, add those elements. Make sure that you put ideas that are similar to one another close together on the page, and/or use roads or other connectors to show their relationships. You might also draw ideas that were more important to the author (or to you) as larger or more dominant than ideas that were less crucial.

- **Add details**. Sketch in some of the supporting examples, and perhaps add any alternatives or contrasting arguments that might need to be represented (perhaps these need to be located across a borderline) or confusing tangents (perhaps these are swampy areas). Is it clear on your map how a reader can identify major pathways or crucial patterns?

- **Provide context**. Think for a few minutes about the larger landscape in which this text/conversation occurs. What other texts have you read, and what other ideas or related subjects/issues can you think of, that you can place out on the borders, as odd trapezoids or neighboring towns, mountain ranges, or galaxies?

- **Add a guide**. Write two or three sentences as a "tourist guide" to the diagram or map: what features are most important to notice, and how should a reader navigate his or her way across the page?

Check for accuracy: Look back at the text, particularly key sections that present arguments or descriptions, and check to see if you have left out or mistaken any key ideas. You might also find a way to expand one of your answers as another viewpoint occurs to you.

By moving from the textual to the visual, you can access alternate learning strategies and create a memorable model of the information you have been processing. Sometimes it's easier to consolidate a set of complex pieces into an overview when "overview" becomes literally a view of the points in a spatial layout rather than merely a mental list or a chain of words.

DIY discussion questions: Recall complexities and continue the conversation

When you were a novice reader, someone else asked you all the questions about what you read, and you provided the answers to show you had "done the reading." Advanced readers show that they have done the reading by being able to ask interesting, provocative questions afterward, as if we were still in the room carrying on a spirited conversation.

Recall, restate, and write: Start a list of issues and complications that remain open, controversial, puzzling, and/or consequential. Without looking back at the text, begin writing questions that you would ask the author, people who agree with the author, or anyone who has read the text and is still thinking about what the author wrote. What else do you want to know? Try not to write "teacher-like" questions (such as "What is the most important theme of this essay?"); instead, you should write real questions that you don't know (but want!) the answer to. You may:

- Write questions that ask the author for more information about the issue
- Ask the author about his/her experiences or choices in writing this text
- Ask questions that begin with "How . . ." or "Why . . ."
- Ask questions that begin "What if . . . " or "Why isn't . . . "
- Inquire about alternate proposals or areas of study related to this issue
- Ask whether other readers you know or in other situations might have had reactions different from yours
- Ask bigger-picture questions that involve the author's overall argument, the larger implications, or connections to other texts or issues linked to your writing project

Check for accuracy: Look back at the text, particularly key sections that are related to your most challenging questions: did you leave out any key ideas? Can you see ways to expand or complicate your questions? Finish out your question list so that it addresses all crucial points.

When you finish your reading by writing questions, you gain the confidence of knowing not just what the author said but where the conversation overall is headed: you have the confidence of a full participant in the conversation, not just a recipient of information. Your questions help you consolidate information and to create a mental model of the issue.

Explore 6.5

Set a timer for 10 minutes. Choose one of the "after you read" strategies listed in this chapter, and use it to write about a reading task you recently completed. If you finish early, add a note: how long did it take you? If the timer goes off before you finish, you can simply stop and add a note: "Stopped here after 10 minutes."

6.5 Reflect to Adapt as a Reader

Researchers have discovered that the most advanced readers and writers share two common characteristics. They have a "growth mindset," a belief that they can continue to learn to become better at reading and writing, and they use reflection to adapt their reading strategies when they encounter challenges or new rhetorical situations.

Adapt while reading

In most cases you probably hope that you can read a text just once, and then rely on your memory, your notes, and some quick look-backs to gather any additional information you need. So if you start to get stuck during that one experience, you will want to make a change right then, while you still have a chance to make more productive, more efficient use of the rest of your time.

Before you reflect on your reading strategies for one text, you should give yourself enough time to see if they're working: complete your pre-reading strategies and read far enough into the text that you "have a feel" for both the style and the major points/themes of the text. But don't wait until the last page or two, after you have invested a lot of time in partially successful strategies and a lot of frustration.

If you've read a few pages and you're feeling "reader's block" coming on, stop and adjust.

Reading challenge	Possible adaptations
I'm not understanding the basic information	• Re-scan the beginning and end of the text to look for the author's goals • Read any headnotes, discussion questions, or assignment notes that may provide information • Take a quick break to search online for an encyclopedia entry or short article that explains some basic concepts in more accessible language • Slow your reading speed down for a while, and/or try a reading strategy like Snapshot or Outline after each section or few paragraphs
I'm not finding the author's main point or argument	• Re-scan the beginning and end of the text to look for the author's goals • Consider the genre or approach and look again: is this a genre in which arguments are stated later in the document? is the author using an indirect approach to narrating or analyzing in which the reader needs to interpret the argument? • Slow your reading pace, and/or try a reading strategy such as Snapshot to help you identify some key points that might add up to the main idea • Try a reading strategy like Predict or Outline to help you consider what might possibly be the key issues
I'm not seeing how/why this is relevant	• Read any headnotes, discussion questions, or assignment notes that may provide information • Take a minute to recall and write your main learning or writing goals: what might be one way they intersect with this text? • Consider your major or profession: how might learning this information or these reading skills help you later? • If you're not the target audience, consider who is: why might someone else find this text relevant?
I'm worried I don't have enough time to finish	• Recall your key reasons or questions (chosen or assigned) for reading this text, and list the top two priorities you can focus on • Re-scan the text and mark the portions you might be able to skim quickly vs. what should be read closely • Try a reading strategy such as Snapshot, which might speed up your reading without losing key information • If you will have use for this text later, remember that investing time in reading closely now will save you time later: try a reading strategy such as Talkback or Annotate to make sure you don't have to reread the whole text to get the main ideas

Reading challenge	Possible adaptations
I'm not staying motivated/focused as I read	• Take a minute to recall and write your main learning or writing goals, for this moment or overall: what might be one way they connect with this text? • Scan ahead to identify two key sections you think will be most valuable for meeting your goals, and start by reading those • Try another reading strategy that involves your own views more, such as Talk-Back or Question • Consider setting a timer for 15-20 minutes, and then planning a five-minute break before you return • Complete a(nother) pre-reading strategy to help leave a record of your current thinking, then take a complete break and come back another day
I'm not using (or not benefitting from) my reading or note-taking strategy	• Don't worry about getting your notes or annotations "right": your goal is to stay engaged with the text and build a reasonable comprehension of it • Try a reading strategy such as Predict or Snapshot, which might speed up your reading, or a strategy such as Annotate or Outline, which can increase your attention • Be patient: it can take time to become accustomed to a strategy and to get your bearings in a complex text

Long-term learning: Review and prepare for your next reading task

When you have completed one or several reading tasks, you should reflect to review your situation: are you satisfied with how you are solving reading problems for this project, in this course, during this semester, or at this job? Would you like to "raise your game" in some way to become a better reader—to save time, to gain more information, to feel less confused, to succeed with projects or exams, or to be able to construct better arguments in your own writing?

Just as reflective writers use what we learn from one project to improve how we approach the next project, reflective readers identify skills or strategies we could improve on, and make a plan to do a little better next time. It makes no sense to try to go from *completely frustrated* to *reading perfectly* in one step, though, so if you are setting a goal to improve as a reader, you might pick just one or two of the approaches below to work on in the upcoming weeks and months.

Strategy: I want to improve at . . .	Approaches: I will take an extra 10-15 minutes per reading to do one of the following . . .
Remembering important information from what I read	• Prepare for reading about a new topic or in a new field by getting help: reading short online articles about the background, terminology, or main participants addressed in what I will read • Prepare my brain for learning by using pre-reading strategies that connect my experiences to and predict the content of what I will read • Stay focused on key points as I read by using a snapshot or talkback strategy • Test and focus my recall afterwards by posing and answering questions, such as the ones in Ten Questions or questions I create
Identifying the key arguments and alternate views that an author provides	• Prepare for reading by getting an initial overview using a strategy such as creating a framework or predicting the content of what I read • Actively watch for key points as I read using a strategy such as snapshots or outlining • Identify controversies by focusing my annotations or talkback comments on points where I or other readers might have disagreements or doubts • Test and strengthen my understanding after I read by summarizing or mapping a document's key points • Focus my attention on complex arguments by analyzing difficult points or asking complex questions after I read
Explaining another author's rhetorical strategies or reasoning (or lack thereof)	• Prepare to analyze an author's strategies by focusing my pre-reading strategy more on how a text works than what it says: I can try to predict or question an author's strategies, not just the content • Focus my annotations or my snapshots as I read on what the text does: makes an argument, provides qualitative or quantitative evidence, uses strong or weak reasoning • Take time after I read to answer questions about what the text did or to map the author's strategies
Integrating what I read more effectively into a course or project I'm working on	• Identify opportunities for connection by using a pre-reading strategy to identify my key questions or connect my interests to what I will read • Focus my annotations on my questions, arguments, or interests as I read • Use a strategy like talking back or making a concept map to connect my questions or arguments systematically to what I'm reading

Strategy: I want to improve at . . .	Approaches: I will take an extra 10-15 minutes per reading to do one of the following . . .
Managing my reading dispositions better with improved time management, persistence, and/or motivation	- Mentally prepare for how long or challenging my reading might be by using a pre-reading strategy that predicts my speed or predicts the content of what I will read - Plan a reading approach that perhaps doesn't review every section equally by using a pre-reading strategy such as creating a framework or identifying my key questions - Use an annotation strategy that includes honestly noting my own experiences, questions, or frustrations, and remembering that all readers struggle sometimes - Use both immediate and delayed post-reading strategies like five-sentence summary and concept map to ensure that I accurately recall (and have notes on) my reading, so I don't waste time with unnecessary review

Even as an advanced reader, working your way through difficult college or professional texts can feel as though you're learning to read in another language or for a whole new purpose. When you try a new reading technique, you might not be very graceful at it or comfortable with it the first time you try it, and you might not succeed or see progress immediately. You might even fail outright.

However, you should keep practicing to figure out how to become more skilled at that approach, seek feedback from a peer or instructor to help you measure your achievements, and adapt the strategies to suit your goals. When you start to see progress on one goal or gain confidence with one strategy, you can move to another one.

Explore 6.6

Once you have completed *any two* advanced reading strategies noted in this chapter for one of your reading tasks, write a few sentences reflecting on the advantages and/or disadvantages of using these approaches. Consider your engagement with the text, your comprehension of it, and your memory of key points: did any strategy help you improve in one of these areas? Add a final note: what's one strategy you might try on your own for an upcoming reading task in another class, workplace situation, or personal project?