

Campus Academic Resource Program

Active Reading

This handout will:

- Discuss strategies for reading faster and more efficiently.
- Provide strategies for locating arguments in texts.
- Offer tips for locating relevant evidence.
- Describe methods for skimming and annotating.

Quick Reading:

Many students find their reading to be overwhelming—especially when they are assigned entire books to finish in mere weeks. As students approach the end of their studies, they tend to be faced with this task more and more often and the end result is usually stress and anxiety.

The reason students become stressed and anxious about reading books can often be attributed to the fact that they think they have to read every chapter, sentence, and word to understand what the author is trying to convey. This is, in fact, rarely the case.

Most texts are actually structured in ways which allow the reader to understand the authors' arguments, evidence, and conclusions without reading every word.

Text Structure:

Books, essays, and articles are typically structured the same way.

- Acknowledgements:
 - Acknowledgement sections are important because they show you who the author works with in their field, which means you can get an idea of what their influences are. By looking at who authors thank and credit in the acknowledgement section, you can get an idea of the author's theoretical influences and potentially their source bases.
 - For example, if an author thanks the Wiener Library in London, a Holocaust Library famous for compiling testimonies into books, you can reasonably assume that the author relies heavily on transcriptions of oral histories and written accounts in their evidence.
- Introduction:
 - The introduction is the **most important** section of a text when it comes to understanding an author's argument.
 - Within the introduction of an academic book or article are the following:
 - The author's thesis
 - A chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the book's contents
 - A brief review of the literature
 - The author's theoretical framework
- Thesis:
 - The author's thesis is the most important piece of information to find in a text. The thesis explains the author's main argument and the evidence they intend to use to prove it. If you know the thesis of a paper, you essentially know what the entire book or article is about.
 - The thesis is typically a 1 to 3 sentence section. It usually comes in the first 2 or 3 pages of the introduction or in the last 2 or 3 pages. It is occasionally denoted by the

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phrases “I will/would argue” or “In this study;” however, you should not rely on these phrases to locate the thesis.

- Instead, look for strong, specific statements and compare them to the Title, the Table of Contents, and the acknowledgement section. If they reflect a lot of the same information, the sentence may very well be the thesis. This is because the order evidence is organized in the Table of Contents reflects the way it is addressed in the thesis.
- Body:
 - The body of a piece of writing contains micro-arguments and evidence. It usually takes the longest amount of time to read due to its size and density. The body is most useful for understanding concepts after you have understood the argument. Although it seems counterintuitive because the body is the largest section, it is actually best to skim this section to avoid getting distracted by details which are not essential to understanding the argument.
- Conclusion:
 - The conclusion is the second most important section of a text because it restates the main argument, the main examples and evidence, and the application of the argument on a broader scope. If you cannot find the thesis in the introduction, you may find it in the conclusion.
- Index:
 - The index is especially useful in situations where you need to locate particular subjects. Rather than looking through every page of a book or article for how the author’s argument relates to the subject you are researching, it is more effective to locate the main argument first, then use the index to find an example of how the argument applies to your area of research.

Due to this structure, it is often unnecessary for you to read an entire text. Instead of cramming your head full of examples and facts, it is more effective to read the following sections in this order:

1. **Introduction**
2. **Conclusion**
3. **Body**

Reading the introduction and then the conclusion allows you to clearly determine the overall argument. After you understand the overarching argument, it will take you less time to understand the smaller arguments and evidence in the body paragraphs.

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Locating Arguments:

As mentioned above, essays and articles are structured the same way as books are. Although books are longer than essays and articles, both essays and articles contain the same components. With this in mind, you will be able to use similar strategies already discussed to locate the main arguments in a text.

1. Introduction

- a. As previously mentioned, the introduction is the most important section of a text to locate an author's argument. The introduction not only contains the author's thesis, but other important components of the text, such as the thesis and theoretical framework.
- b. Like a book, an essay or article's introduction also contains the order in which the arguments will be discussed. In this case, if you have to focus on one of the author's five arguments, you can gauge where in the body you can locate that argument instead of reading all of it.
 - i. For example, if you have to analyze an author's discussion of modernism and part of their introduction reads as follows: "In the following paragraphs, I will discuss pre-World War II literature, post-World War II literature, modernism, meta-fiction, and conclude with LGBT literature" you can determine that the middle of the text will contain the information you are looking for.

2. Conclusion

- a. A text's conclusion is the next most important place to locate an author's argument. It not only reiterates the author's argument, but includes specific evidence the author used in the body of the text to develop and prove this argument.
 - i. Using the above example, you can look to the author's conclusion to determine what specific evidence the author used to discuss modernism. This will give you a better sense of how the author discusses this subject and the specificities used.
 1. Once you know what kind of evidence the author used in the body paragraphs, you can more easily locate this part of the argument in the body paragraphs.

Exercise 1

Read the following part of a sample conclusion. Afterward, use the lines provided to note what specific evidence the author used to discuss modernism.

"As I mentioned, modernism's contribution to literature came to greatest fruition through women authors. I focused on Virginia Woolf's texts briefly, spending most of my time on her novel, *The Waves* for its exemplary representation of stream-of-consciousness writing. Although there were many men who also contributed to modernism, I also focused on Ezra Pound's declaration to 'Make it new!' and his direct help in T.S. Eliot's success as modernist contributors. Since I did not have adequate space to discuss all of modernity, my focus on these particular literary figures illuminates my theoretical notion that modernism was an inherently queer movement. Furthermore, as has been discussed, I do not use the word queer to represent sexuality or desire. Rather, I use it to represent

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the queerness behind this literary movement and its resistance to previous societal norms which encapsulated literature as an expression of the soul. In this sense, I moved away from connotations of queer sexual desire so often discussed in this literary period and instead focused on queering the status quo.”

What specific evidence did the author use to discuss modernism? Think about key words the author uses in the conclusion.

3. Body paragraphs

- a. Once you determine what you need to focus your reading on from the introduction and conclusion, you can begin to peruse the body paragraphs. In this sense, **skimming** and **annotating** will be beneficial tools to use when reviewing the text’s body paragraphs.
- b. Before defining the two tools listed above, you should also keep the following strategy in mind:
 - Look for headings and subheadings in the body paragraphs.
 - Longer articles may be broken up into sections, especially if the author discusses multiple concepts and sub-concepts. Still using the above example, this article may be broken up by the types of literature listed in the introduction. The headings may look something like what is listed below and may or may not be bolded.
 - Pre-World War II Literature
 - Post-World War II Literature
 - Modernism
 - Meta-Fiction
 - LGBT Literature
 - In addition to headings, which tell the reader the overarching concept discussed, authors may also use subheadings. Subheadings relate to their heading and act as supplemental information. So, considering the above exercise, the modernism section may look as follows:
 - **Modernism** (heading)
 - Virginia Woolf* (subheading)
 - The Waves* (subheading to the previous subheading)
 - Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot* (subheading)
 - A Queer Movement* (subheading)
 - Skimming
 - Skimming an article, essay, or book effectively will help you complete your reading on time. Skimming effectively helps you save time because you are not reading every word. Instead, you look for key words and phrases to gather

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information and comprehension. Dartmouth College offers some methods to effectively skim a text.

- Key words in a title
 - Dartmouth suggests that certain key words guide the reader to the author's plan for the text. Words like "versus" and "pros and cons" suggest that the author will present both, or multiple, points of an argument.
- Look for organizational clues, such as headings and subheadings (as mentioned above)
- Skim for italicized, bolded, or underlined words.
 - These words are usually differentiated because they are important to the text. The author wants them to stand out so the reader can more easily find them.
- Look for signal words that suggest lists of points.
 - Although an author may lay out a main point in the introduction or conclusion (as mentioned above), the author may also have several sub-points not listed in subheadings. For example, the end of a paragraph may say something like, "The following paragraphs will cover the five most important factors which led to the rise of modernism."
 - This sentence shows the reader that the following paragraphs will discuss these five factors in detail.
- Redundancy
 - Authors repeat their information to ensure that the reader understands important information.
- Annotating
 - Annotating is a reading comprehension strategy that involves marking the actual text to highlight key points, summarize main ideas, ask questions, and make connections. Unlike note-taking, annotating records your initial impressions of a text, which can be a useful tool during review. Below is a brief overview of how to effectively annotate a text. For more information on annotating, see our handout, "How to Annotate" at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>.
 - Write brief summaries
 - Paraphrase important ideas
 - List or number ideas (steps, processes, cause and effect)
 - Highlight or underline key ideas and concepts
 - Make predictions
 - Write definitions of unknown words
 - Ask questions
 - Make connections
 - Draw pictures for visual connections
 - Develop a system of symbols

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Works Cited

Maxwell, Martha. "Six Reading Myths." *Academic Skills Center*. Dartmouth College. 2001. Web. 25 January 2016.



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