Chapter 1: Reading Like a Professional

Many college students who graduate at the top of their high school classes experience a rude awakening when, after reading an assignment for a college course, they fail a quiz over the assignment the next day in class. What happened? You know you read every page of the assignment, but when the professor asked you about a specific point in the reading, you blanked. Or even worse, even as you read, you were never quite sure just what the author’s **central argument**, or **thesis**, was.

The reading assigned in college courses can be quite challenging. Authors often pursue their goals in complex and sophisticated ways, employing vocabulary, metaphors, and allusions that are unfamiliar to many readers. Authors of literature are no exception to these practices. Yet, avid fans of poetry, fiction, and drama often claim that the world is broadened incredibly by literature, if only one can determine how to navigate it.

You probably enjoy reading certain kinds of texts, such as internet articles on your pet interests or biographies of people you admire. You may even have literary favorites. You may have spent many happy hours immersed in the world of Middle Earth, in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, or in Forks, Washington, trying to guess what will happen to Stephenie Meyer’s Bella in the *Twilight* series. Still, you may feel a bit uncertain surmising the meaning of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s allegorical short story “Young Goodman Brown” or interpreting Robert Frost’s sonnet “Design.” Take heart! The more you learn about literature and the more you practice unraveling its meanings, the more adept you will become at understanding it. In fact, this is the case for all kinds of texts. Many students just beginning to study law, for instance, find the specialized language and style of the field almost impossible to understand, but after a year or two of reading case documents, they undoubtedly find the task much less daunting. Similarly, students new to academic research articles and books often have difficulty plowing through them and then summarizing the authors’ points. Yet, after some practice, this task becomes much less challenging and even—dare I say it?—intellectually stimulating!

So how does one improve comprehension of such texts? The following “active” reading process is recommended to boost you beyond common frustrations with challenging reading assignments. It may seem tedious at first, but if you practice it often enough, it will become second nature to you as you tackle tough readings.

1. Skim the text first. Get an idea of what sort of text you are dealing with. Is it an article based on primary research, such as experiments or participant interviews? Is it a critique of a previously published study? Is it a personal essay based on the author’s life? Is it a sonnet or a one-act play? How is the piece structured? Can you find a statement or passage that seems to capture the text’s central message?
2. Next, read the whole piece slowly and carefully. We cannot expect to understand dense, sophisticated texts through the same reading process by which we might read a newspaper article or a Facebook post. We must be willing to slow down to absorb subtleties and complexities.
3. Engage with the text. **Annotate** as you go. In other words, write on the page! If you cannot write directly on the page, use sticky notes or electronic note-taking strategies. Look up unfamiliar terms and jot down the definitions, highlight or underline key ideas, and write down questions and ideas that come to you as you read. Note patterns in the text that might be considered later to help unravel the meaning.
4. Reread the text as necessary. Seek to fill in gaps in your understanding that may remain after your first reading.
5. Gather outside information about the piece’s context if it is helpful, though you should be careful not to “read into” the text’s meaning too much. Any historical or biographical interpretation of a literary work must still be supported by the text itself.
6. React. Record your personal response to what you read. If you disagree with a statement, make a note of your reaction. You may change your mind as you proceed through the text, but moving beyond the role of a passive reader, who simply memorizes information, will generate a much deeper understanding. Your brain wants to fit this new perspective into the other ideas already stored there. Working through contradictions and/or exploring relationships between old information and new information will increase retention and understanding of the new material.

Using the guidelines above, let’s consider this excerpt from a scholarly article by Jacob Michael Leland, “‘Yes, That is a Roll of Bills in My Pocket’: The Economy of Masculinity in *The Sun Also Rises*.”

A great deal of critical attention has been paid to masculine agency and its displacement in Ernest Hemingway’s fiction. The story is familiar by now: the Hemingway hero loses some version of his maleness to the first World War and he replaces it with a tool—in Upper Michigan, a fishing rod or a pocket knife; in Africa, a hunting rifle—a new object that emblematizes his mastery over his surroundings and whose status as a fetishized commodity and Freudian symbolic significance is something less than subtle. In *The Sun Also Rises*, this pattern repeats itself, but with important differences that arise from the novel’s cosmopolitan European setting. Mastery over the elements, here, has more to do with economic agency and control over social relationships than with nature and survival. The stakes are different, too; in the modern European city, the Hemingway hero recovers not only masculinity but also American identity in social and sexual interaction. (37)

In researching *The Sun Also Rises* for a project, Ling Ti found Leland’s article. What follows is her annotated copy of the above excerpt:

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| Agency: the ability to assert one’s will, as an agent  Emblematizes: represents  Freudian symbol: something representing subconscious insecurity or desire – knife= penis=mastery? | A great deal of critical attention has been paid to masculine agency and its displacement in Ernest Hemingway’s fiction. The story is familiar by now: the Hemingway hero loses some version of his maleness to the first World War and he replaces it with a tool—in Upper Michigan, a fishing rod or a pocket knife; in Africa, a hunting rifle—a new object that emblematizes his mastery over his surroundings and whose status as a fetishized commodity and Freudian symbolic significance is something less than subtle. In *The Sun Also Rises*, this pattern repeats itself, but with important differences that arise from the novel’s cosmopolitan European setting. Mastery over the elements, here, has more to do with economic agency and control over social relationships than with nature and survival. The stakes are different, too; in the modern European city, the Hemingway hero recovers not only masculinity but also American identity in social and sexual interaction. | Displacement: being pushed out of your position  Fetishized: obsessed over  Commodity: some- thing to buy and sell  Economic power = masculinity = mastery? |

If Leland is saying that the character uses economic mastery to feel like a man, what does this say about big spenders in general? About American consumers who think they have to have a certain kind of phone or car or jeans? Is spending really related to masculine identity? I’m not sure—I need to think about it. Maybe it’s at least true for Jake in the 1920’s Paris and Spain settings of the novel.

Upon her first reading of the article, Ling wasn’t quite sure what Leland was saying, but after interacting with the text according to the above recommendations, she was able not only to understand his argument but also to consider *whether or not it is convincing*.

#### Exercise:

Try this process with The Gettysburg Address. After skimming, rereading, annotating, and reacting to the text, compare your notes on the speech’s meaning with those of your classmates. Does this process of *active* reading give you a deeper understanding than a simple, passive reading would?

The Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle- field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln November 19, 1863

Regardless of the *type* of text you are confronted with, this engaged reading process should serve to deepen your understanding of it. An important assumption of this book is that as your reading skills become more sophisticated, so will your writing. As you practice these methods of active reading, you will likely begin to regard your own writing in the same way that you do the other texts you read. You will learn that the strategies used by well-regarded authors are available to you as a writer, and you will begin to imagine your audience’s reaction to your writing more effectively than you have done in the past. You will start to recognize that reading and writing are inextricably related to one another.