How to Read Like an English Major

A white paper prepared by students in the Arnhold Collaborative Project,
"Reading and Attention" (Summer 2019)

Contributors: Rebecca Baker, Madison Balasek, Marcela Davila-Cham, Helen Foley, Hailey Gross, Stephanie Hockman, Emma Johnson, Malia de Mello, Gary Mitchell, Jasmine Palmerin, Leila Stegemoeller, Brenda Tan, Ryan Watt
Graduate RAs and Editors: Rebecca Baker and Leila Stegemoeller
Director: Dr. Rita Raley

Attention is dependent on both **modes of reading** and **conditions of reading**. Our environment, our schedule, and even the font size of our books play a role in how well and how long we can sustain focus. No one learns in exactly the same way, and there is no one way to be a "good" reader. But there are ways to experiment with your routines and habits in order to improve your reading practice—and help you enjoy reading even more!

For our Arnhold project, we studied cognitive science and behavioral research on reading in digital environments and spent a few months collectively reflecting on the different ways people read now. We then co-authored this white paper, which is intended to serve as a general guide for students enrolled in classes in the English department, to help them navigate a media environment in which books are merely one element and the status of the written word is in flux.

Juggling classes, work, and social obligations during the quarter system can be daunting, and the purpose of this white paper is not to add to student workload with yet another "life hack" program, or to suggest we have discovered the perfect formula for academic success. Our purpose rather is to start a conversation and share our ideas about how to read in a moment in which everything and everyone seems to be competing for our attention.

General Advice for Readers

1. Try to get a high-level sense of the structure and genre of the text before you begin reading, in order to orient yourself to the work. Ask yourself: What are the components of this text? What does it look like? How is it organized? How would you describe the use of language?

2. When you start to read, try not to be intimidated or allow yourself to get bogged down with concerns about "what the teacher wants." At least in the first pass through a text, focus on what you find compelling and new. You may even think about reading a text like listening to an unfamiliar song: literature, like music, opens up with repetition. Each reading reveals different aspects of the text.

3. Be sure to set aside a realistic amount of time to complete a given reading. This varies by assignment (fiction, poetry, or theory), and also requires some individual experimentation. If you read slowly, don't feel as if you are insufficient—many intelligent, literary people do!

4. Give some thought to the time of day and place in which you are reading. Do some experimenting to see what conditions are best for you, to take advantage of when you are most alert. Some people find it helpful to move from place to place.

5. Not all editions are high quality or even authorized. Inexpensive or free editions are often available (especially with public domain titles from the 18th or 19th century) but may not be the wisest choice. Professionally published editions often include valuable footnotes, context, and standardized page numbers. And editions you find 'in the wild' may not be copyedited and may be rife with errors and even omissions. If budgets are a primary concern (when are they not!), borrow the book from the library.

6. Learning styles can be trained and are not fixed for life. However, **visual learners** might benefit from writing out ideas while reading on a separate page, or mapping out ideas into diagrams. **Tactile thinkers** may need mechanical stimulation while doing a task that can include taking annotations while reading, highlighting and underlining, tracking with a physical object, using fidget devices, even taking a walk while reading. **Aural methods** of learning include using audiobooks and reading passages aloud.

7. Partner and group reading may motivate you to finish difficult readings and assignments, and help keep you on track.

8. Consider using the "Pomodoro Technique" to divide daunting tasks into smaller, more manageable parts. Work on a reading assignment for 25 minutes, then rest for 5 minutes.

9. Switching between different types of activities and reading material throughout the day may help you avoid cognitive exhaustion. Some studies have shown that small, measured periods of multitasking and even cultivated distraction can help foster creativity and prevent burnout.

10. Note taking is helpful at several stages of your reading process:
    a. Annotate texts (highlight, take notes, circle words) to help yourself retain meaning.
    b. When returning to a text for a second time, the methods you use to review should shift. If the device allows, try rereading only your notes or annotations.
    c. Writing out the key points in your own words (or a conversation with a peer) helps with both retention and with formulating ideas for discussion in class.

11. What do you listen to when you study? The ability to focus on reading while listening to music varies from person to person and even day to day. Literature scholars in particular may have a harder time entering the world of a story when the lyrics of a song are pulling us in other directions. You may want to experiment with no sound, white noise, earplugs, or taking breaks from your music if your usual playlist distracts you.

Reading on Digital Devices

12. What you read *on* can be as important as the subject matter you are reading. Some works of literature are reflowable, which means they can be adapted to different e-book formats and read on tablets, e-readers, or even mobile devices. For others (e.g. poetry, graphic novels), page layout is fundamental to the text. When page design, spatial arrangement, and even font choice contribute to the meaning of the given text, avoid digital editions that eliminate these features. To the extent possible, read texts that look like they do when they were originally published.

13. Digital reading: once you are confident that your e-book, particularly if accessed from an online repository (e.g. Project Gutenberg), is a legitimate reproduction, there are many ways to customize your reading experience. Consider the following:
    a. Adjusting font size, font style, and line spacing;
    b. Using "Text mode" (Chrome), "Reader view" (Firefox), or "Reader mode" (Mac) to eliminate visual noise and approximate the look of a printed page;
    c. Inverting the displays (black background with white text) to avoid eye-strain;
    d. Removing ads from your browser window and blocking pop-ups.

14. Did you know that even having your phone face down in your line of sight can be distracting? If you are reading on your phone, or even if you use it for music or as a timer while studying, consider moving it, activating a do-not-disturb feature or airplane mode, or else switching the display to grayscale to minimize distractions.

15. Don't be afraid to research productivity tools and apps to customize your reading environment (e.g. change font display, block social media apps, eliminate ads). If you think it might (or should) exist, it probably does!

16. Most devices emit blue light, which can disrupt your sleep, which in turn has a big impact on your concentration. Many devices now have a "night" setting, which makes the light warmer, and turning down the brightness can also help.

17. Sometimes, an old-school pen and paper is the way to go—understand your own predispositions, and tailor your studies accordingly.