

How to Read

Many Divinity School students, like graduate students in general, grow frustrated with how long it takes them to do their reading. You may be tempted to “skim” the reading, read sporadically or even to skip assignments. Or you may have heard of “speed-reading” methods that can cut your reading time in half.

The bad news is that deep reading matters more than speed-reading. The good news is that there are ways to be more selective and more productive in your reading. But before we turn to those methods, consider why it is you need to get through the reading more quickly. The all-too-common answer is, “I don’t have enough time!” You rarely meet people who say they have so much free time that they don’t know what to do with themselves. Nowadays even retirees complain that they’re too busy. And yet, most people can recount hours of TV that they have watched this week. Or Internet sites that amused them all evening. Shopping malls, Broadcast networks, and Internet businesses would all go bankrupt if we really had no time. So – it’s a matter of priorities. You may have to put these other distractions on hold while you’re in graduate school. To make the most of Divinity School – to engage in the kind of intellectual and spiritual formation that a seminary education entails – you have to internalize as well as interpret the assigned texts. You can’t get this kind of personal formation, let alone spiritual formation, when you’re sole focus is to turn the pages as quickly as possible.

And yet, admittedly, you can’t read everything slowly. We’ll talk about “close readings” and reading for research elsewhere [links], but it’s important to specify that you can’t do a close reading of everything. But you do need to cover all that you’re assigned. If you read too quickly or too sporadically (just the first and last paragraphs, for example), you’ll miss key parts of the argument or misunderstand it entirely. So you have to know when a passage deserves a slower, more thorough reading, and when you can move on. How do you choose? You have to develop skills of judgment. As your own skills are developing, rely on the wisdom of your professors! When a professor draws attention to a particular passage in lecture, be sure to write it down. Go back and read through that section very carefully.

Do likewise with passages that are offered for writing assignments, even if you have chosen to work with a different passage.

You also have to become a more critical reader. Rather than just diving in and trying to plow through, be aware of what kind of book or text you’re dealing with. Is it a text book? A historical survey or monograph? An abstract theological argument? A summary of others’ theological arguments? You should avail yourself of two sources of “hints” about what kind of texts these are: your syllabus and the beginning of the books themselves (table of contents, preface, introduction, etc).

Then, be aware of how the material is presented: look over the structure of the text. How are the major arguments presented? Are there major sections with summaries? A glance at the index can tell you which topics are covered in greatest detail and are thus more important to the author.

Note taking:

Just as you have to be a savvy reader, take care when taking notes. Obviously, your note taking will go faster the less you write. Some students err by trying to reproduce

entire articles in their own writing. If this sounds like you, you can resist compulsive note-taking by waiting until the end of a chapter or section to write up a (brief) summary. This will force you to remember what you've read and begin to analyze it.

One can also err on the side of taking too few notes. The most blatant example is not writing down the source of the notes themselves!

Start your notes with full bibliographic information. Get in the habit of getting it right the first time. If you photo copy an article, copy the title page and add the date. Many journals now include full information on the first page of an article, but not necessarily in your format.

Also be sure that you write down enough that you can understand the argument later. Obviously, you want to avoid plagiarism, but there is also a danger of misinterpretation. Be sure to get the line of argument right and not just record simple statements. Don't just write, "Prof. X supports euthanasia," but include how she supports it, the counterarguments involved, and the most important supportive statements. Also be careful not to miss qualifying statements such as "often," "sometimes," etc. And be very careful when the book you're reading summarizes another's argument – don't confuse whose opinion is which.

Distinguish in your notes between direct quotations, paraphrases and your own thoughts about the reading. You might come up with a system of notation to distinguish these kinds of notes (such as putting quotation marks around everything that is in the author's words, leaving your paraphrases as plain text and placing your thoughts about the text in boxes, or underline them). Be sure you write down the page numbers for each thing you record, so you can cite things accurately.

If you are taking notes in books you own, avoid the temptation merely to highlight. It doesn't translate well into thought. Try to write very short summaries in the back. You can also create your own index by writing down page numbers of key terms, themes or points. Keep a running "cast of characters" (This is especially important for fiction or long historical works!)