


8

READING IDEAS



READING CAN BE either passive or active. You read passively when, for example, you pick up a piece of writing and read it straight through, starting at the beginning, moving quickly through passages that do not interest you, and putting it aside, perhaps forever, when you have finished. Most people read passively most of the time—and with very good reason. Passive reading works perfectly well for getting the gist of a piece of writing. It allows for fairly simple information to be communicated, more or less intact, from the author to the reader. Passive reading works just fine for skimming a newspaper over breakfast, reading the day's mail, browsing the Web, or curling up in bed with an entertaining novel.

College-level reading, however, usually requires a more active approach. You should not expect to read challenging texts like the ones in this book the same way that you would read the back of a cereal box. No one can read difficult texts without some effort. People who read challenging texts successfully are not necessarily smarter than other people; they have simply mastered a set of strategies that allow them to get the most out of what they read.

This chapter will explore some of those active reading strategies, including **pre-reading, annotating, identifying patterns, reading visual texts, summarizing, and reading with a critical eye**. Mastering  these skills will allow you to make your way through challenging material—and the texts in this book will give you plenty of practice.

PREREADING

Experienced readers rarely approach difficult texts without a pretty good idea of what they will find. This may sound odd, since the whole point of reading something is to find out what it says. But good readers know that reading is a process that begins long before they physically pass their eyes over the words on a page. **Prereading encompasses all of the things that you do, before you start reading, to increase your capacity to understand the material.** In many cases, taking just a few minutes to learn more about what you are about to read can dramatically increase your reading comprehension and retention.

Most college textbooks include a fair amount of editorial apparatus that has been designed to aid in the prereading process. The most obvious examples of this kind of apparatus in an anthology like this one are the chapter introductions and the introductions, or headnotes, to the individual readings. But footnotes, endnotes, study questions, and essay assignments also provide valuable clues to the themes and topics that the editors believe to be important. You might even first read the questions at the end of a reading—they will tell you some of the things to look for when you read the text.

Skimming a text is another good way to get a sense of what you are likely to find in it. A quick reading, in which you look at the beginning, some of the middle passages, and the end, can tell you a lot about the shape of the argument. People whose major reading experience is passive often find it unsettling to read the end of a work before reading the beginning. “Spoiling the ending” is the wrong way to read a mystery novel, to be sure, but it can be a very good way to read a complicated text. You might, for example, find a complicated text’s major points summarized in neat little packages at the ends of essays or chapters. If you are struggling with what an author is saying, the end is just as good a place to start understanding it as the beginning. No rule says that you have to go in order.

The key to prereading is to use all of the resources available to you to understand a text *before* you start reading it. Your mind can focus on only so much while you read. Most likely, you try to construct a “big picture” while you read something. In the process, you often skip over important details because you lack a conceptual framework into which you can place these details. **If you build the big picture before you start, you begin reading the text with a conceptual framework already in place.** Then, when you encounter a new detail or a new bit of evidence in your reading, your mind will know what to do with it.

QUESTIONS FOR PREREADING

Here are some of the key questions that you should ask as you gather information in the prereading stage of the reading process:

Who is the

The more i
anticipate t
Aung San S
things abou
is (1) the d.
academic, (
Jr., (4) the
military dic
rently unde
facts—whic
any of her b
Quest of D
general arg
for those cl

What was t

None of the
things to wr
that shapec
good reader
nal intenc
readers, thi
When it was
very wealthy
text, “Again

What cultur

The further
to understa
seem espec
modern rea
of these cul
Mo Tzu’s “/
tion of mus
know that,
only to the
Mo Tzu’s at

What are so

Authors ten
ing somethi

Who is the author of the work?

The more information you have about an author, the better you will be able to anticipate the kinds of points that he or she will make. In reading a work like Aung San Suu Kyi's "In Quest of Democracy," for example, you can infer certain things about the argument before reading the text, once you know that the author is (1) the daughter of a famous Burmese political leader, (2) a Western-trained academic, (3) a devoted admirer of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., (4) the winner of a democratic national election that was invalidated by a military dictatorship, and (5) an outspoken advocate of democracy who is currently under house arrest in her own country. Knowing these key biographical facts—which are readily available in the selection introduction, on the back of any of her books, and on dozens of Web pages—allows you to begin reading "In Quest of Democracy" with a pretty good understanding of Aung San Suu Kyi's general argument, allowing you to focus on her specific claims and her support for those claims.

What was the work's original purpose?

None of the texts in this anthology were written for college students in need of things to write essays about. They all come from historical and rhetorical contexts that shaped both their meanings and their methods of presentation. Even very good readers can misread a text when they ignore the characteristics of the original intended audience. Take, for example, Mo Tzu's "Against Music." To modern readers, this essay might seem like a strict, old-fashioned argument against music. When it was written, however, music was a symbol of luxury, available only to the very wealthy, who enjoyed it at the expense of everybody else. In its original context, "Against Music" was therefore a radical attack on privilege and power.

What cultural factors might have influenced the author?

The further removed you are from an author's culture, the more difficult it can be to understand that author's work—even when the work's terminology does not seem especially difficult. When dealing with texts from very different cultures most modern readers will have to learn something about the conventions and concerns of these cultures before they can make sense of the texts. The basic argument of Mo Tzu's "Against Music"—that society should not support or allow the production of music—will make very little sense to contemporary readers who do not know that, in ancient China, music was an extremely expensive luxury available only to the most wealthy members of the aristocracy. Those who attempt to apply Mo Tzu's arguments to modern notions of music will miss the point entirely.

What are some of the author's major concerns?

Authors tend to have certain concerns that they address in many works, and knowing something about a particular author's concerns can often help you to interpret

his or her works. Knowing that Plato was perpetually concerned with the nature of reality, that Garrett Hardin wrote mostly about overpopulation, and that Gandhi consistently opposed British imperialism in India will help you understand the *Gorgias*, “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor,” and “Economic and Moral Progress.”

What larger conversation is this text part of?

A written text is part of a larger conversation, and reading a single text is often like listening to only one part of that conversation: you miss most of the questions that have been asked and points that are being responded to. Occasionally, this anthology will give you different texts from the same general historical conversation, such as the debate between Mencius and Hsün Tzu on the sense of human nature within Confucianism, or the opinions of Averroës and Maimonides on the connections between religion and science. More often, though, you will need to **familiarize yourself with the terms of the discussion** that surrounds a text you are preparing to read.

In anthologies, this kind of information might appear in the chapter introductions or in the headnotes or footnotes that accompany texts. You might also locate it quickly in a good encyclopedia or through a Web search. The effort required to learn as much as you can about a text before you start reading it will almost always pay off in increased understanding and increased retention—not to mention the time you will save by having to read the text only once to grasp its meaning.

PRACTICE PREREADING

Read the following passage from John Henry Newman’s “Knowledge Its Own End.” On your initial reading, do not do any prereading—just read it straight through and then summarize its key points.

I am asked what is the end of University Education, and of the Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that what I have already said has been sufficient to show that it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward. And if this is true of all knowledge, it is true also of that special Philosophy, which I have made to consist in a comprehensive view of truth in all its branches, of the relations of science to science, of their mutual bearings, and their respective values. What the worth of such an acquirement is, compared with other objects which we seek,—wealth or power or honour or the

convenience
maintain, and
and undeniably
the compass

Once you have
to the headnote
following ques

1. Who was
2. What was
Newman
become
3. How did
have to c
4. What did
“liberal k

After you have
again, then co
key facts about

After prereading
text closely. Yo
or a pen.

Reading wit
look up words
people instead
texts. Sometim
reason to take
uses, you are
is used. When
a good diction

Your other
reader, you sh
separate piece
borrowed from

conveniences and comforts of life, I do not profess her to discuss; but I would maintain, and mean to show, that it is an object, in its own nature so really and undeniably good, as to be the compensation of a great deal of thought in the compassing, and a great deal of trouble in the attaining.

Once you have read this passage without any prereading and summarized it, turn to the headnote for this reading (p. 53) and use the information in it to answer the following questions:

1. Who was John Henry Newman, and when did he write?
2. What was the original context of “Knowledge Its Own End”? What was Newman’s position when he gave the lecture that would eventually become this essay?
3. How did Newman define the word “Catholic”? What did this definition have to do with his view of education?
4. What did Newman see as the difference between “useful knowledge” and “liberal knowledge”?

After you have answered these four questions, read and summarize the passage again, then compare your second summary to your first one. How has learning key facts about the text changed your ability to make sense of what you read?

ANNOTATING

After prereading to gather information about a text, your next step is to read the text closely. Your two most important tools will be a good dictionary and a pencil or a pen.


Reading with a dictionary at hand is extremely important, as it allows you to look up words that you do not know. This practice sounds obvious, but many people instead try to figure out the meanings of difficult words by their contexts. Sometimes, this strategy works; sometimes, it does not. But there is no reason to take the chance. **If you do not understand a key term that an author uses, you are much less likely to understand the arguments** in which the term is used. When you come across a word you don’t know, you will want to check a good dictionary.

Your other important close reading tool is a pencil or a pen. As an active reader, you should write while you read. Taking notes on a computer or on a separate piece of paper is a good practice when reading a library book or one borrowed from someone else. Within your own book, **annotate** the text as you

read by **underlining key passages, writing comments in the margins, and recording insights as they come to you.** Studies have shown that even if you never look again at the annotations that you make, the act of making them will increase the amount of information that you will recall in the future. Combining the act of writing with the act of reading helps you better understand the information that you read.

As you gain experience with active reading, you will discover annotation tricks and strategies that work for you. Different people annotate texts in different ways, depending on their learning styles and methods of recalling information. Here are a few things to keep in mind as you annotate difficult and unfamiliar texts:

Underline key points and any thesis statement

Whenever you encounter a single statement or part of a paragraph that summarizes one of the author's major arguments, **underline it and write something in the margin that tells you that this is a key point.**  Once you determine that a certain statement summarizes a key part of the argument, you can use this statement as a reference point to see how that argument is supported. (For more on thesis statements, see p. 579.)

Note your insights

As you read a difficult idea, a certain part of your brain tries to forge connections between what you are reading and what you already know. This process can produce important insights while you are reading. However, if you do not record these insights, you may very well not remember them. Just the act of writing them in the margin helps to make them part of your long-term memory.

Respond to the author

Reading is always part of a dialogue with an author, and marginal notations are a good place to carry on that dialogue. **If you strongly agree or disagree with something that you read, make a note of it.** These notes will serve you well when it is time to develop your opinions in the form of an essay or in-class writing assignment.

Avoid the temptation to underline or comment too much

Like any good thing, annotating can be overdone. This overkill often defeats the purpose of annotating, since if everything is underlined it becomes impossible to distinguish what is important.

Here, using the same passage from "Knowledge Its Own End" that we used in the section on prereading, is an example of a moderate use of underlining that combines some of the strategies listed above.

What is the purpose of education?

Knowledge a good thing worth obtaining, even if does not lead to other good things such as wealth or status

What is the purpose of education?

I am asked what is (the end of University Education), and of the (Liberal) or Philosophical Knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that what I have already said has been sufficient to show that it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward. And if this is true of all knowledge, it is true also of that special Philosophy, which I have made to consist in a comprehensive view of truth in all its branches, of the relations of science to science, of their mutual bearings, and their respective values. What the worth of such an acquirement is, compared with other objects which we seek,—wealth or power or honour or the conveniences and comforts of life, I do not profess here to discuss; but I would maintain, and mean to show, that it is an object, in its own nature so really and undeniably good, as to be the compensation of a great deal of thought in the compassing, and a great deal of trouble in the attaining.

Liberal knowledge = interdisciplinary "useless" knowledge

Thesis: Acquiring knowledge is good in and of itself

Knowledge is a good thing worth obtaining, even if it does not lead to other good things such as wealth or status.

IDENTIFYING PATTERNS

Whenever you write, you use, consciously or unconsciously, some kind of organizational pattern. If you are writing about something that happened to you, your organizational pattern will likely be chronological (this happened, then this, and then this . . .); if you are describing a place, you will probably use a spatial order; and so on. When you are reading an unfamiliar text, it helps to try to figure out what kind of organizational pattern the author is using. This knowledge will help you anticipate arguments and conclusions and know where to look for them in the body of the text. Most good writing has characteristics of several different patterns, but often one pattern predominates, if not in an entire essay, at least in a particular passage. Here are some of the more common organizational patterns for written prose:

Chronological order

Historical texts, descriptions of events, personal narratives, and travelogues are often organized chronologically. The narrative begins at one point in time, then moves through the period described, with **successive points in time forming the major organizational units of the text.** Since the readings in *Reading the World* have been arranged chronologically, the chapter introductions generally use a straightforward chronological pattern to organize their main ideas:

Spatial order

While descriptions of events are often organized chronologically, descriptions of things and places are often organized spatially. Spatial organization can be used to describe everything—from the nucleus of an atom to the known universe. When prose accompanies pictures, charts, graphs, or other graphic information, the text's content is oriented spatially to the visual information.

Classification

When an author wants to describe a number of different things—be they members of the beetle family, types of clouds, Greek philosophies, or (in the case of what you are reading right now) methods of organizing written information—he or she might create a classification system for the information and then **present the information as a list.** The list might be set off with bullets, headers, or other formatting information, or it might simply occur normally in the text, with nothing to indicate where the description of one item ends and another begins.

Claim/support

One of the most common organizational strategies of scientific and philosophical writing—including many selections in *Reading the World*—is to begin by stating a proposition (such as “human nature is evil” or “population grows exponentially while

food sup-
tion, and t
This organ-
sition” usu-
statement
that you n
p. 579.) O
will have a
once in the

Problem/sol-
Essays that
gency” or C
are often o
stated first.

Statement/
Another co
ment/respc
ally one tha
that argum
rebut other
responds to

Cause/effec-
One standa
from a caus
strategy. W
the cause a
Obligation t
then describ
effects first
Emergency”
back to char

Narrative
Stories, or n
New Testam
of great phil
or illustrate
by an interpr
or discussion

food supply grows arithmetically”), to continue by offering support for that proposition, and to conclude by restating the proposition and explaining its ramifications. This organizational pattern is also commonly used in college essays, with the “proposition” usually called the “thesis statement.” (In college writing, though, the thesis statement will probably not look like the “thesis” of the five-paragraph essay model that you might have learned in high school. For more on thesis statements, see p. 579.) Once you have identified an essay as being organized in this fashion, you will have a pretty good idea where to look for the main point: it will probably be stated once in the first paragraph and once again near the end.

Problem/solution

Essays that make specific policy arguments—think of Al Gore’s “The Climate Emergency” or Garrett Hardin’s “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor”—are often organized from the top down: with the problems that need to be solved stated first, followed by the proposed solutions.

Statement/response

Another common organizational pattern of the readings in this book is statement/response. This strategy involves quoting or paraphrasing an argument (usually one that you oppose) in the beginning of the essay and then responding to that argument in the remainder of the essay. This form is usually used in texts that rebut other texts and in persuasive essays in which the author anticipates and responds to objections.

Cause/effect

One standard assumption of philosophy and science is that every effect proceeds from a cause. This movement from cause to effect is an important organizational strategy. Writers who organize their arguments along these lines can begin with the cause and move on to explain the effects—as Rachel Carson does, in “The Obligation to Endure,” when she explains the chemical composition of DDT and then describes its effects on the environment. Many authors, however, present the effects first and then trace them back to a cause, as Al Gore does in “The Climate Emergency” when he presents the effects of global climate change and traces them back to changes in humanity’s relationship to the earth.

Narrative

Stories, or narratives, are an important part of many different kinds of writing. The New Testament parables, the Buddhist *suttas*, African folktales, and the writings of great philosophers, ancient and modern, often rely on short narratives to make or illustrate points. In many of these texts, the narrative is followed immediately by an interpretation, in which the story becomes the basis for some conclusions or discussion.

Comparison/contrast 

When an author is comparing two things—ideas, movements, people, etc.—he or she will often organize the text as an explicit comparison or contrast. Such an organizational pattern usually takes one of two forms. In the first of these forms, the author spends the **first half of the essay discussing one subject of the comparison and the second half discussing the other**. In the second variation, the author establishes several grounds for comparison and then **goes back and forth** between the things being compared. In *Reading the World*, perhaps the most straightforward example of this kind of organization is Matthieu Ricard and Trinh Xuan Thuan’s “The Universe in a Grain of Sand,” which compares and contrasts the perceptions of a Buddhist monk and of a quantum physicist.

READING VISUAL TEXTS 

The word “text” does not apply only to written works. An oral narrative is a text, and so is a piece of music, a painting, a photograph, or a film. Works of all these types address audiences, advance ideas, make arguments, and require thoughtful strategies of reading and interpretation. In addition to its written texts, *Reading the World* includes a number of texts that present their ideas visually. These visual texts should be studied as seriously and interpreted as diligently as the written texts in the book.

Many of the strategies that we have already discussed apply just as much to visual texts as they do to written texts. Artists, like authors, have objectives, cultural contexts, and recurring concerns, and they respond to historical discussions and debates. You can ask the same “prereading” questions of a painting as of an essay. You can, however, use some additional reading strategies with visual texts. For an introduction to some of these strategies, look at the detail on p. 559 from William Hogarth’s engraving *Gin Lane* (the full text of which appears on p. 320).

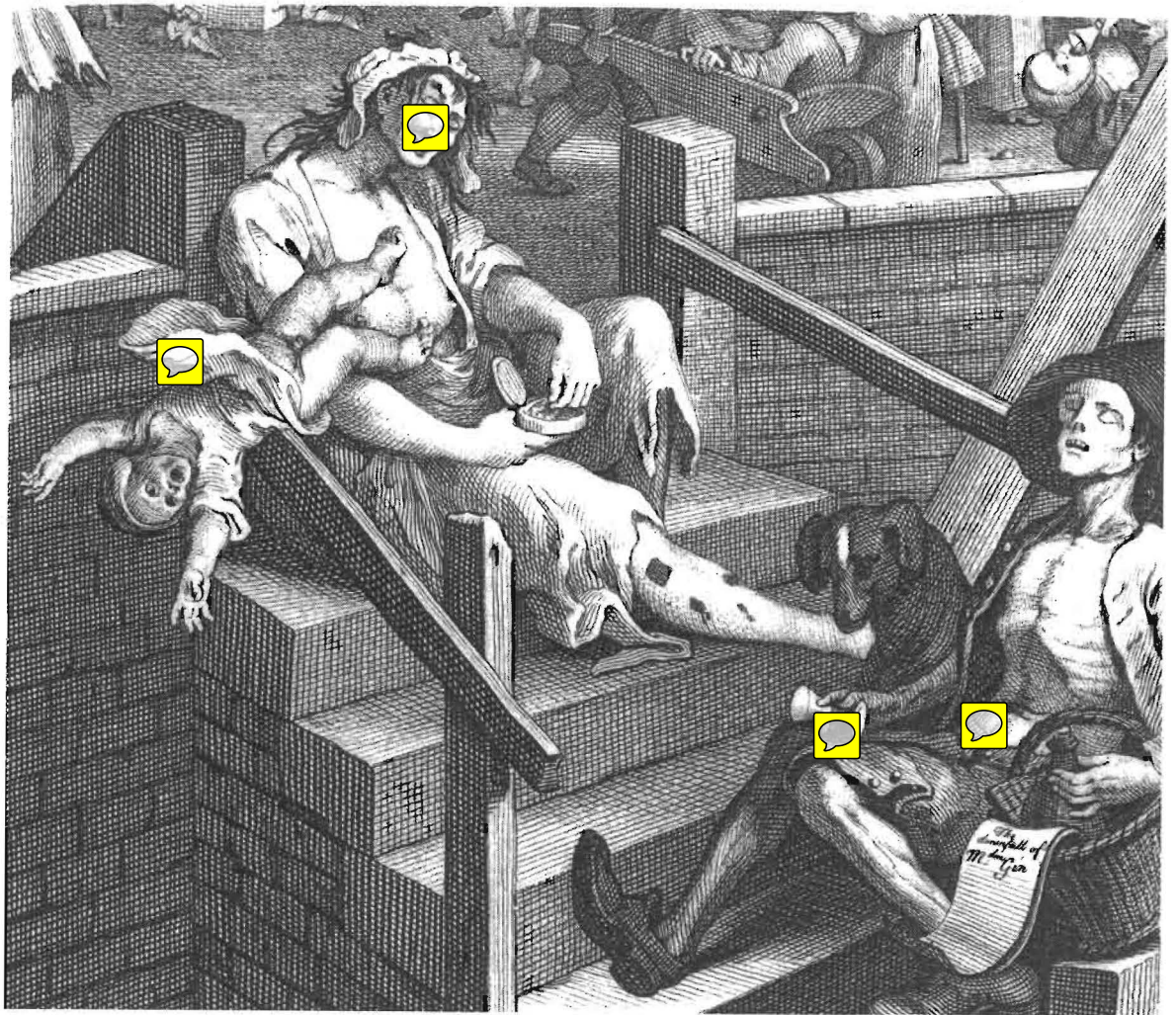
This detail shows two of the scenes in the foreground of the engraving. It is not difficult to understand Hogarth’s message. Knowing only that the engraving is titled *Gin Lane*, you can infer that both of the major figures are intoxicated. One of them, a woman, is reaching for a pinch of snuff while her child falls from her breast and over a railing. The other figure is a man—holding a glass of gin in one hand and a bottle of gin in the other—who appears to be starving to death. Taken together, the two images present a fairly complete argument, which, if rendered in prose, would read something like: “Drinking gin is bad because it causes you to ignore your own health and the well-being of your family.”

But there is much more to the text of the detail than this paraphrase suggests. As in most visual texts, the most important parts of the argument are made using visual elements, many of which cannot be translated into words without losing most of their rhetorical force. Some of the most important things to look for when “reading” a visual text are:



WILLIAM HOGARTH
Gin Lane, 1751
Bibliothèque

Emotional
Hogarth’s por-
breasts to
look of pu
support of
extremely
visually. M
tion, and a
Symbolism
motherhood



WILLIAM HOGARTH

Gin Lane, 1751 (engraving, detail).

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France / Lauros-Giraudon / Bridgeman Art Library

Emotional appeals. Few images are as pitiable and emotionally charged as Hogarth's portrayal of a drunken mother allowing her infant child to fall from her exposed breasts to a certain death. The mother's oblivious lack of concern combines with the look of pure panic on the infant's face to produce a powerful emotional appeal in support of the otherwise bland argument that drinking gin is bad. Most people are extremely affected by emotional appeals, especially when those appeals are made visually. **Most people can read many words about great suffering, misery, deprivation, and abuse without feeling the emotions that a single picture can convey.**

Symbolism. The image of a baby at its mother's breast is a powerful symbol of motherhood and self-sacrifice in cultures throughout the world (see, for example,

Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* on p. 341 or the Igbo statue on p. 129). By inverting this symbol, Hogarth taps into a very deep pool of cultural—and even cross-cultural—associations involving infants, mothers, and nursing. Many of the visual texts in this book feature similar kinds of symbolic representation: the swastikas decorating the tall banners in the still from *The Triumph of the Will* (p. 199), the gun and the French flag carried by Liberty in *Liberty Leading the People* (p. 268), and the light coming from the lamp in *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (p. 402) all convey ideas through symbols whose physical forms only suggest their ultimate meaning.

Visual irony. Hogarth was a master of visual irony, much of which **requires very close reading of his art.** For example, there is an obvious irony in the fact that the man in *Gin Lane* is starving to death while clutching a large quantity of gin, whose price could have purchased food instead. Only a very careful viewer will notice the irony, however, in the piece of paper in his basket. It reads “The downfall of Madam Gin,” which is presumably the title of a broadside ballad, possibly one that he wrote himself, that he has been attempting to sell in the neighborhood—in order to get enough money to buy more gin.

Motifs. If you look at the full version of *Gin Lane* (p. 320), you will see that the two images in this detail are **part of larger motifs, or patterns of images that mirror and comment on each other.** The “neglected child” motif is refigured in children and infants throughout the picture, including one who is being given a glass of gin instead of a milk bottle, one who is fighting with a dog for a bone, and one who is being carried through the street impaled on a skewer. The “suicide by gin” motif is just as prevalent and serves as the overall “big picture” motif of the engraving. The entire community is in the last stages of a painful death brought about by the ravages of gin.

Composition. **Any visual text includes compositional elements—line, perspective, color, use of space, etc.—that contribute to the work’s meaning.** In *Gin Lane*, for example, the mother and her infant are foregrounded and brightly lit so that the eye is immediately drawn to them, emphasizing their importance in Hogarth’s argument. The dominant lines in the complete engraving—the top of the brick wall, the rooftop pole at the top right, the signpost on the building on the left, and the staircase and its railings—are at random angles to each other, emphasizing the unpredictability and topsy-turviness of a world dominated by gin.

All of these elements combine to form an overall impression. If the artist has arranged the elements well, the viewer will gain an overall sense of the text that can itself become a powerful persuasive element. Visual images can create impressions of, among other things, reverence, power, wonder, despair, peace, awe, and patriotism. The overall impression of *Gin Lane* is one of decay

and hope
to gin c

Visual
meaning
an impr
ent tech

If you re
marize it
or partial
In other
ing point
or critiqu
standing

A goc
though,
major pc
are supp
good ide
has not
create a

Identify t
Even if th
an essay,
ning of y
and it wi

Identify s
A summa
author us
long wor
evidence
(see p. 59)

Quote fr
Good sur
very selec
tial point

and hopelessness—both of which, according to the artist, should be attributed to gin consumption.

Visual texts convey just as much as written texts, but they do not make their meanings in quite the same ways. An essay on the evils of gin might give the reader an impression similar to that conveyed by *Gin Lane*, but it would use very different techniques to do so.

SUMMARIZING

If you really understand something that you have read, you should be able to summarize it in your own words. Often, teachers will assign essays that consist entirely or partially of summary as a way to evaluate your understanding of difficult material. In other kinds of essays, brief summaries of difficult information can give you a starting point for more sophisticated kinds of writing, such as analysis, synthesis, research, or critique. **As part of active reading, summarizing helps you solidify your own understanding of a text and identify what you need to think about or analyze more closely.**

A good **summary** need not relate every point that an author makes. It should, though, explain clearly and concisely the intent of the text being summarized, the major point or points that the author makes, and the major ways that those points are supported. A reader of your summary should feel that he or she has a pretty good idea of what the source you are summarizing is saying, even if that person has not read the original. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind as you create a summary:

Identify the main point

Even if the author does not come to the main point until the middle or the end of an essay, you should identify the main point immediately and **put it at the beginning of your summary.** Doing so will make clear early on what the text is about, and it will help you focus and organize the rest of your summary.

Identify support for the main point(s)

A summary does not always have to explain every specific bit of evidence that an author uses to support an argument (especially in very short summaries of very long works). It is important, however, for the summary to explain the kinds of evidence (analytical, experimental, statistical, deductive, etc.) that a text employs (see p. 595).

Quote from the text when appropriate

Good summaries often quote from the texts that they summarize, but they do so very selectively. The objective of a summary is to boil a large text down to its essential points. Similarly, quotations in a summary should include only a few words

here or there to get the point across, rather than large blocks of text that give complete arguments. Quote only when the author has stated something so eloquently that you cannot restate it, or when you want to emphasize the author's own words. Be sure to mark the quotation clearly, in quotation marks, and to cite the page number where the quotation is found.

Use your own words

When you summarize someone else's writing, make sure that you use your own structure as well as your own wording. A summary does not need to move chronologically through the text, relating points in the order that the author presents them. Because summarizing is an intellectual activity that you control, you should **employ organizational strategies that fit your own needs**, which may or may not mirror those of the author whose text you are summarizing.

READING WITH A CRITICAL EYE

To truly understand a text, you will often need to analyze its assumptions, discover its deeper arguments, and respond to those arguments with ones of your own. To do any of these things, you will need to read the text critically, in ways that require you to do more than simply understand what is being said on the surface.

Critical reading is difficult to define, as people in different disciplines use the term differently. In a literature class, "critical reading" may mean examining a literary work to find symbolic meanings beneath the surface, while in a history class it might mean evaluating the reliability of different sources used to reconstruct a historical event.

Perhaps the best way to define "critical reading" is through its opposite: uncritical reading. Those who read uncritically are likely to be persuaded by the loudest voices rather than the soundest arguments. Such readers tend to gravitate toward arguments that confirm their preconceived ideas, accepting such arguments without serious examination, and they usually reject opinions—and even well-documented facts—that challenge their beliefs. Uncritical readers can be very "critical" in the ordinary sense of the word, but they base their criticisms on how closely authors mirror their own points of view rather than on the texts' merits.

Critical readers, by contrast, approach all texts with a certain amount of skepticism, but they do not reject any argument without a fair hearing. They try to set aside their personal biases long enough to understand what they read. They seek to understand both texts and the contexts in which they are written, including, when appropriate, an author's use of symbolism, imagery, metaphor, and other figurative devices. Once they understand an argument on its own terms, critical readers evaluate its claims, its evidence, and its underlying assumptions both fairly and rigorously. They do not change their minds every time that they read some-

thing new, b
with an opin
part of learn
higher educa
Learning
crete steps t

Think about
The process
have your ow
ture and the
and your ow
you try. Beir
having opini
own beliefs;
take them ir
ent from you
realize wher
what a text i

Understand
Just as read
approach a
miliar persp
to your own
shaped by c
perspective:
bling blocks

Determine
All texts ma
port that p
main point:
dence are i
a text's effe

Evaluate th
An author
covered in
mental dat
or speaker'
kinds of ev

thing new, but neither do they refuse to consider a new idea because it disagrees with an opinion that they already hold. Learning to read critically is an important part of learning to think critically, which is one of the primary skills expected in higher education.

Learning to think and read critically is a lifelong process, but you can take concrete steps to develop the habit:

Think about your own perspective

The process of reading and thinking critically begins with the realization that you have your own perspective. Some aspects of your perspective come from your culture and the time in which you live; others may come from your family, your friends, and your own experience of the world. You cannot avoid this situation, nor should you try. Being situated in a culture, a time period, a society, and a family—and having opinions about things—is part of being human. You cannot eliminate your own beliefs, but you can be aware of them, understand where they come from, and take them into consideration when you read something with a perspective different from your own. You need not accept everything that you read—but you should realize when your own perspective might be getting in the way of understanding what a text is saying.

Understand the author's perspective

Just as readers have their own perspectives, so do authors. As a reader, you must approach a text with a balance of respect and skepticism, being open to an unfamiliar perspective while examining it with the same critical analysis that you apply to your own beliefs. You should approach every text that you read as having been shaped by cultural and individual perspectives, and you should realize that all such perspectives—your own and everybody else's—come with both insights and stumbling blocks of their own.

Determine how the argument works

All texts make arguments in the sense that they assert at least one point and support that point. Critical readers pay attention to how arguments work: what the main points are, what the supporting points are, and how different kinds of evidence are invoked to back up major and supporting points. You cannot evaluate a text's effectiveness until you understand the mechanics of its argument.

Evaluate the support for a claim

An author can support his or her claim in different ways, many of which will be covered in chapter 11. Some claims are supported by statistics, some by experimental data, some by logical analysis, and some simply by the force of the writer's or speaker's personality. There is no one right way to support all claims, but some kinds of evidence are more appropriate than others for certain kinds of claims.

Critical reading involves determining whether a text employs **appropriate kinds of evidence for the kind of argument it is making.**

Once you have determined the appropriateness of the kind of evidence that a text employs, you must still determine the strength of that evidence. For example, if statistical evidence is the best way to prove a certain point—such as Garrett Hardin’s argument, in “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor,” that the earth’s population has exceeded its carrying capacity—you must evaluate the relevance and representativeness of the author’s statistics. If drawing out general principles from historical examples is a good way to prove a particular point—such as Machiavelli’s assertion, in *The Prince*, that it is better for a ruler to be feared than to be loved or Octavio Paz’s assertion, in “The Day of the Dead,” that Mexican identity is shaped by profound solitude—you must examine the relevance of the author’s or authors’ historical examples *and* the relevance of historical examples that have occurred since the texts were written. Both Thomas Malthus and Rachel Carson, for example, made arguments about what would happen in the future. Things that have happened since they wrote might confirm or refute the cases that they made.

Think about underlying assumptions

Most claims have stated points and underlying assumptions. The stated points are the ones that the author makes. The underlying assumptions are the premises that, though never stated, must be true for the argument to succeed. These unstated assumptions may be so obvious that the author does not feel the need to restate them; they may be assumptions that the author wishes to conceal from the audience; or they may be foundational beliefs so deeply engrained that the author does not recognize them. When you read, think about the assumptions beneath the author’s claim. What needs to be true for the claim to be true? What would prevent the claim from being true? The chart below presents some assertions and the unstated assumptions that underlie them.

STATED ASSERTION

The best way to derive truth about nature is through direct observation because primary evidence is better than secondary evidence.

Human nature is evil because people are inherently selfish and incapable of genuine concern for other people to the exclusion of self.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION(S)

Human senses give reliable information and do not deceive us.

Focusing on one’s self is evil, and focusing on other people, to the exclusion of one’s self, is good.

Democracy government maximum a individuals.

Helping tho because we to eliminate as we can.

Higher educ it helps peop more money

Of cours left-hand co could be, ar claims in th assumption debated; ar sponding a beneath the lie those as

Democracy is the best form of government because it guarantees the maximum amount of freedom for individuals.

Helping those in need is important because we owe it to fellow human beings to eliminate as much suffering and misery as we can.

Higher education is a good thing because it helps people get good jobs and earn more money throughout their lives.

Giving individuals a maximum amount of freedom is a good thing. / Individuals will not use their freedom in ways that destroy society and each other.

Helping those in need will relieve suffering and will not cause a greater amount of misery in the long term.

Earning more money is a good thing.

Of course, every assertion in this chart is debatable. The stated claims in the left-hand column, while very common, are not self-evidently true. Every one of them could be, and has been, disputed. However, even if you generally accept the stated claims in the left-hand column, their arguments absolutely depend on the unstated assumptions in the right-hand column. Each assumption can also be plausibly debated; and the rejection of any one would lead to the rejection of the corresponding argument in the left-hand column. Critical readers know how to delve beneath the stated assertions in a text and **evaluate the assumptions that underlie those assertions.**

ids of
that a
mple,
arrett
" that
e the
neral
-such
eared
Mex-
ce of
xam-
s and
r the
e the

oints
rises
hese
need
from
t the
ions
What
sser-

tion