

## **Teaching Guide for GSIs**

### **Teaching Critical Reading**

Students are assigned heavy reading lists throughout their years at UC Berkeley, and frequently they skimp on their reading. On Berkeley's 2014 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey, 47% of the respondents reported reading 70% or less of their assigned readings during the academic year. Only 32% reported completing 81% or more of their readings.

Several factors can contribute to the shortfall, but a phenomenon many GSIs encounter -- and one they are in a good position to address -- is that students sometimes employ ineffective strategies for their readings and become disengaged or discouraged when they perceive that the gain from their reading is low. Many assume that reading any text means reading straight through, from beginning to end, as one would a novel. Advanced students and professionals, however, do not read academic and professional literature in this way; instead, they have developed a set of informed strategies.

Strategies for critical reading can vary by discipline, text-type, and the purpose of the particular reading assignment. Textbooks, research reports, epic poems, ethnographies, eyewitness journals, and scholarly articles all demand different processes that we call "reading," and students may never have thought about employing differential strategies. "Reading critically" is a fairly abstract concept; students are helped greatly when their GSIs explain and demonstrate what it looks like, processes and behaviors, in their particular course context and discipline. When students know more about what you want them to get from a text and how to get it, they will spend their study time far more fruitfully. Their new-found competence can, in turn, motivate them to keep up.

This section of the Teaching Guide offers strategies developed by GSIs and faculty members at UC Berkeley for their teaching situations. Some are addressed to GSIs, others to students. It can be very useful to compare how someone in a different discipline from your own conceives of and teaches critical reading. As you look these pages over, think about ways you can encourage students to read critically for your course.

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## **Teaching Guide for GSIs**

### **Guiding and Motivating Students**

GSIs may be the first to know when students are having trouble with either the kind or the volume of assigned readings. Students may show up in class without having prepared the readings, and this produces frustration for GSIs whose lesson plans depend on students coming to class prepared, as well as for students who have succeeded in doing the reading and are ready to work with the content.

How can we motivate students to prepare the readings adequately on their own? Remember that your course isn't just about content: it also requires skills to get at and work with the content. A good starting point for students is to show them what you mean by "read" for your particular course or a common kind of text in your field. It may be that nothing in their previous academic or reading experience has prepared them for the kinds of learning activities you as an instructor have in mind when you assign a reading.

What are some typical pitfalls when reading texts that are important in your course? What are the most useful reading behaviors? Here are some activities to start thinking about. What suggestions would be on your list?

- read the introduction, then list what you anticipate the rest of the text will try to do
- skim first before reading word-for-word
- scan first sentences of paragraphs first to get the gist
- read the abstract and "results" section first, and translate them into your own words
- look up unfamiliar terms, or try to figure them out from context (and how do you do this?)
- summarize or outline the argument (and bring it to class)
- list key words and concepts
- look for tensions in the argument or in the use of key concepts
- apply a particular set of instructor-generated questions to their reading
- notice the uses of particular linguistic or rhetorical features
- read or ignore sidebars of a textbook chapter
- work through all the sample problems, or just a few of them
- make notes as you read
- make notes in the margin of the text
- make connections with other content in the course

On the first reading assignment of the semester, you might bring several activities such as those listed together to give a step-by-step reading process for your students to start with. Follow up with a way students can demonstrate to you (and themselves) what they have gotten out of these steps. As the semester proceeds, work toward further procedures for more conceptually sophisticated objectives, such as discerning a rhetorical context or tracking a bibliographic or analytical trail.

Giving students such detailed guidance does not mean reducing a complex intellectual engagement into a rote exercise, nor does it mean taking students' creative agency as readers away from them. It means initially working with the procedural knowledge (how people read in your discipline) that is necessary for them to get at the conceptual knowledge (content and relationships) you want them to ultimately work with.

Success with this kind of guided practice will give them a sense of mastery, which translates to motivation to move on to independent practice (in other words, more effective reading activities on their own).

To read more about the learning model this approach is based on, see the subsection "Learning" on our **Cognitive Constructivism** page. For more on different kinds of knowledge (e.g., "procedural" and "conceptual"), see the "Cognitive Processes" section of Leslie Owen Wilson's page "**Beyond Bloom -- A New Version of the Cognitive Taxonomy.**"

## **Teaching Guide for GSIs**

### **Critical Reading in the Natural Sciences**

Jann Vendetti, Integrative Biology

Journal articles and scientific papers are the medium through which biologists relay their research to their colleagues. Scientific articles are most often presented in a standard format, beginning with an abstract, followed by an introduction, then methods, results, and finally conclusions. A good paper presents the author's topic, data, and interpretations clearly and logically.

**The reader's challenge** is to comprehend the paper's main ideas despite new vocabulary, unfamiliar tone, and often complex subject matter. This requires **active and critical reading**. The following strategies suggest how to facilitate active & critical reading while minimizing frustration.

### **Strategies of Critical Readers**

- Identify the paper's major conclusions from the Title and Abstract. Keep its theme(s) in mind while reading the entire paper. Look up unfamiliar words as you encounter them. Re-write them in your own words if necessary, and use that definition when you encounter them later in the paper.
- Learn from headings within the Introduction, Methods, Results, & Conclusion. These may be summations of major themes of the paper or signify topic shifts.
- Tolerate confusion or ambiguity during your first read. Try not to expect the complexities of the paper to be clarified immediately. Your confusion can generate excellent questions that may be answered during your second read, or if not, provide material for discussion or further investigation.
- Don't be put off by complicated Methods. In most cases you don't have to understand all details of the paper's experiments or analyses to make a sufficient synopsis of its main conclusions.
- Summarize. As you reach the end of a section of interest, ask yourself if you could explain it to someone else. If yes, great! If no, give it another read.
- Ask yourself questions throughout the paper. This is the "critical" component of critical reading. Is evidence well-supported? Presented clearly? What are the study's broader implications?
- Read the paper a second or third time, highlighting key points. Check these points with your summaries and the author's abstract. Does your interpretation of the paper match theirs?

### **Habits of Critical Readers**

Effective habits, of mind and of practice, are crucial to developing critical reading skills. A simple routine that works for you can make all the difference. The following are some suggestions.

- Use a marking system. This is a note-taking/making scheme that you use consistently to mark-up or take notes on the paper that you are reading. It may include written notes in the paper's margin, short summaries at the end of sections, stars/arrows/circles/numbers at key passages, color coded highlights, or Post-Its that designate main ideas, confusing sentences, evidence, unfamiliar words, etc.
- Read without distraction. Critical reading is best done when you are focused and comfortable, but not too comfortable. This might be at a library study cubicle, a coffee shop, or wherever you find you work well and are alert.

## **Teaching Guide for GSIs**

# **Critical Reading in the Social Sciences**

Manuel Vallee, Sociology

**What is Critical Reading?**

**Overview of the Four-Step Approach**

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**In-Class Discussions**

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**Appendix: Detailed Description of the Four-Step Approach (pdf)**

## **What is Critical Reading?**

It is reading actively with the goals of identifying arguments, weighing evidence, evaluating sources, looking for conflicts of interest, and questioning underlying assumptions. It is distinctly different from the passive reading associated with reading novels, which many students mistakenly apply to academic texts. Regardless of discipline, critical reading is an important skill that will help students become more informed and, hopefully, more effective citizens.

## **What does it mean for social sciences?**

In the social sciences critical reading also means being aware of how a reading fits into an analytic lineage. That means identifying the research question being asked, what has been said about that question, and what the current author is contributing to the analysis.

## **What difficulties do students face?**

Students at the beginning of their college career might confuse the concept of critique with the idea that they are always supposed to criticize a reading. Others might confuse critical engagement with a text with the hopeless task of distinguishing the part of an article that is objective and factual from the part that is opinion, biased, or just plain false.

## **Where do these difficulties come from?**

This confusion stems from a model of teaching prevalent at the high school level that teaches students to memorize answers that have been coded as "facts" for one-time testing. In general, beginning college students have not been prepared to critically engage with their texts, understand how the texts are part of an intellectual lineage, or question the assumptions that have been built into the particular models of understanding that they have been exposed to in different disciplines.

Therefore, in asking students to become critical readers within many disciplines at the college level, we are asking students to develop a skill set which is diametrically opposed to that which they have become proficient in at the high school level.

## **How do we help students surmount these difficulties?**

To alleviate these difficulties I offer a comprehensive, four-step approach to critical reading as well as suggestions for assignments, in-class discussions, and ways to help students better relate to social science articles.

## **Overview of the Four-Step Approach**

This approach includes three layers of reading as well as a "response" component. Good readers will reread a piece several times until they are satisfied they know it inside and out. It is recommended that you read a text three times to make as much meaning as you can.

## First Reading: Previewing

The first time you read a text, skim it quickly for its main ideas. Pay attention to the introduction, the opening sentences of paragraphs, and section headings, if there are any. Previewing the text in this way gets you off to a good start when you have to read critically.

## Second Reading: Annotating and Analyzing

The second reading includes annotating and analyzing the evidence in support of the argument. It should be a slow, meditative read, and you should have your pencil in your hand so you can annotate the text. Taking time to annotate your text during the second reading may be the most important strategy to master if you want to become a critical reader.

## Third Reading: Review

The third reading should take into account any questions you asked yourself by annotating in the margins. You should use this reading to look up any unfamiliar words and to make sure you have understood any confusing or complicated sections of the text.

## Fourth Step: Responding

Responding to what you read is an important step in understanding what you read. You can respond in writing or by talking about what you've read to others.

Below I provide details about the first two levels of reading and the "response" portion of the approach. Additionally, I provide suggestions for critical reading assignments, topics for in-class discussions, and ways to help students better relate to academic texts.

## Assignments to Promote Reading Efficiency

### Freewrite

Immediately after reading the article or chapter, write about it for 15 minutes. Do not concern yourself with logic, style, punctuation, or any other standard of "correctness." If, in the middle of a sentence, another idea comes to you -- go with it. The point of this exercise is to get down as many of your impressions of what you have read as possible without having to consider any possible use for what you are writing. Just let yourself think about what you have read and record these thoughts.

### Reflect on the Title

Before reading the article or chapter, reflect on its title. Write a paragraph about what is conveyed by the title, what the article's focus will be, and what you believe the argument will be. Don't worry about "getting it right," as that isn't the point of this exercise. Then read the article in question and, when you are done, summarize the author's argument. After summarizing the argument, reflect on a) how your reading of the article or chapter was informed by reflecting on its title, and b) whether you were misled by the title.

### Reflect on the Abstract

Same as above, but with the article's abstract instead of the title.

### Evaluate the argument

Read the introduction and conclusion of the article. Then identify the argument of the text. Then take ten minutes to free-write, identifying what types of evidence the article will need to provide to persuade you of its argument. Read the article, and then write a paragraph that analyzes the extent to which the article did or did not meet your expectations. Were you persuaded by the evidence? Why or why not?

### Freewrite about Connections to Other Readings

After freewriting about the article, take a short break, and then do a free-write on the various ways you think the text links up to the preceding texts covered in the class, and/or themes of the course. What are the similarities and differences in terms of

subject matter, research question, geographical focus, temporal focus, type of data, and argument?

## Identify Citation Lineages

- a) Make a list of the theoretical approaches mentioned in the text.
- b) Make a list of the specific authors referred to.
- c) Make a list of the key concepts used in the text (can the reader glean a working definition of these concepts from the text?).
- d) Mark each member of the lists created above in reference to the author's relationship to it. Does the author mention the theoretical approach, concept, or thinker under consideration as an advance to previous thinking, or does he / she emphasize the limitations of it?
- e) What is the author's main analytical point as opposed to the ideas of other thinkers in the text?

## Answer Reading Questions

Another strategy is for the instructor to provide reading questions a few days before the readings are due. These can include standard questions, such as "what is the author's argument?" and "how does his / her argument relate to the readings that preceded it?" Or, the questions can be more specific to the article, such as asking them to define key concepts in the reading. The questions provide students with guidance about how to read texts and help focus class discussion around salient points. Also, teachers can provide extra incentive by offering extra credit to students who submit satisfactory written responses to the questions.

## In-Class Discussions

### Discuss Reading Strategies

Set aside class time for a short discussion about the reading process. Ask each student to share one or more strategies that help them with their reading assignments. This could pertain to places they read, the number of pages they attempt to read at one sitting, comfort of the reading environment, time of day, etc. This exercise will help the students become more conscious of their reading habits or strategies, learn about the reading strategies used by others, and help build classroom solidarity.

### Discuss Difficulties

Have a similar conversation about the difficulties students face vis-a-vis the readings and how they have sought to address those difficulties.

## Apply metaphors

A difficulty experienced by many social science students is understanding that a particular article is a piece in an ongoing analytical lineage. To address this difficulty, below I provide metaphors that help students read analytically within a particular disciplinary lineage. As well, these metaphors help students understand that the main task that they are expected to be proficient in is to understand analytical arguments and the assumptions that those arguments are based on, not only for the author they are reading now but for the authors that the current author is citing.

- The metaphor of a **citation lineage**: This expression can itself be considered a metaphor. It references the fact that disciplines within an analytic tradition produce texts that are densely referenced and that authors are working within multi-layered traditions of citation.
- The metaphor of a **conversation**: Instead of trying to read for "the facts" encourage students to see an article as an on-going conversation in which the current author of the article being read is engaging with other authors' ideas. These other authors might span large expanses of time and disciplinary space so the student needs to pay attention to the different authors and concepts mentioned. They need to start to construct a conceptual map for themselves.
- The metaphor of the **party**: Tell students that reading an analytical article feels very similar to going to a party where they know only one person, but everyone else has been going to the same parties for years. The new person (the student) doesn't know the prior history of the groups (who hates whom, who used to date whom, for example) and needs to be filled in on the back story. This is very similar to many disciplines in which the on-going conversation that a particular author is making an intervention into is quite complex and pulls from divergent sources. When students are first asked to read an analytical argument that is densely referenced, they may get confused and give up. The metaphor of the party lets students know that you

expect them to feel over-loaded when they first read an article that is densely layered from multiple citation lineages.

- The metaphor of **enemies and allies**: This is very similar to the metaphor of the party but emphasizes the fact that the author being read either agrees or disagrees with aspects of the argumentation of the other thinkers cited in his / her own article. Students therefore need to pay attention to tone.
- The metaphor of a **language class**: This helps students understand that we are giving them "real" articles that will be difficult for them in the beginning. When students start to read this kind of text they might feel like they are being asked to read a third-year foreign language text when they haven't yet taken the first two years.

## References

Crusius and Channell, *The Aims of Argument*, Mayfield Publishing Co., 1995.

Mather George, Ph.D. Candidate, Anthropology, UC Berkeley. GSI Teaching & Resource Center workshop on critical reading, Spring 2007.

Diane Matlock, Ph.D., English, UC Berkeley. GSI Teaching & Resource Center, Guiding Research Papers: Evaluating Sources.

**What Is Critical Reading, and Why do I Need to Do It?** The Writing Center, Cleveland State University

**Critical Reading**, Writing @ Colorado State University.

## Appendix

The remainder of Manuel's document can be viewed in the

**Appendix: Detailed Description of the Four-Step Approach (pdf)**

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## **Teaching Guide for GSIs**

### **Critical Reading in the Humanities**

What is "critical reading" for the humanities? For any given discipline in the humanities? Each instructor over time develops a working idea of the kinds of goals, procedures, and strategies involved in it. As scholars we all internalize some procedures, and we sometimes don't realize that our less advanced students lack this procedural knowledge. It needs to be made explicit for most of them.

"Reading" is a highly generic term for many students; they don't necessarily understand that instructional purpose, genre, and strategy are involved. To many, to read is to decode the surface meaning and try to remember it. They may additionally look for something to criticize or to form a personal opinion about, but in the humanities this can be frustrating because they may harbor a vague sense that the "great works" of literature and art or the great turns of historical events require a sublime sensibility they must either have, or pretend to have, or pick up from their instructors. What many students find empowering is to learn that study and criticism in the humanities are more about concrete objects, skills they can develop, and networks of meaning they can learn about and learn to construct.

Students need to develop greater range and flexibility in their engagement with literature, art, history, and culture. They tend to try to fit whatever new ideas they're reading with things they already think rather than letting the "other" be "other" on its own terms. For example, they may so insist on using the popular and familiar terms of a debate that they have trouble grasping a text that introduces different terms or a different paradigm. So they may think they see things in a text that aren't "there" to a reader with different expectations. They make what connections they can.

This is not a bad situation; it's a starting point. Students must work forward from where they are. They need **both** to connect the material to their current understanding **and** to allow the new material to help them reshape their evolving understanding into new schemas.

The sheer volume of their reading load can hinder students' critical development as readers. Instructors often assign a large volume of reading material that many students can't realistically process without some well informed strategies. This leaves them to come up with "economies of effort" that may derail the instructional purpose of the reading. For example, students may go to the Internet to find auxiliary material to supplement (or reduce the challenge of) the main reading, and then become reluctant to engage with the skill building and the terms of discussion the instructor is introducing.

### **Suggestions for Teaching**

In the first class meeting, provide a brief text, musical piece, or image for students to analyze. If you introduce a text, keep the passage down to two pages or less. Model the kinds of questions you ask when you analyze such a text or image. Help students begin to articulate what's curious to them. Guide this discussion in the direction of some important tips you've thought through beforehand.

Provide this set of tips to students to take with them as they do their first analytical reading assignment. Let them know what kind of text they'll be reading, a few essential questions to ask, and what **good** websites they can use for reference. (As a point of departure you may want to look at an **example developed by a GSI in English** that does a great job orienting students to reading practices relevant to her particular course.)

Return to these tips and expand on them frequently through the semester. Keep the students focused on performing the procedures until they're second nature to them. Although flexibility of thought is the ultimate goal, the practices constitute an important step toward flexibility.

Let students know that there's a lot more to reading than decoding content. Show them a few different kinds of texts and demonstrate, briefly, that reading a poem, reading a chapter of a novel, and reading a critical article are quite different activities -- there's some overlap, but each has its own set of characteristics. Introduce the ideas of **genre** and **strategy**.

Much of what happens in humanities sections is "class discussion." Some students approach class discussion as a performance venue for ready talkers to sound smart. To even the field for all students, it helps to define with students what class discussion is

supposed to accomplish: something along the lines of an exploration and collaborative analysis of a text. In other words, try to cultivate a supportive classroom setting in which students can join in the processes of reading, questioning, misprision, adjustment, and location of cruxes without any negative judgment of the participants.

A hallmark of a UC Berkeley education is learning to do independent analysis and evaluation of primary sources. Let students know that whatever sorts of "helps" or summaries they find on the Internet or elsewhere will be no better than what they can come up with themselves with a bit of work -- and that the ability to do this work is a major objective of their UC Berkeley education.

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## **Teaching Guide for GSIs**

### **Developing a Reading Heuristic or Guide for Students**

Effective reading strategies can vary by discipline, text-type, and the purpose of the particular reading assignment. They can also vary with the level of the student and the instructor's purpose in making the assignment.

Here are some reading heuristics developed by GSIs and faculty members at UC Berkeley for their students. They address a range of students and a range of disciplines and text-types. As you look them over, think about what you want your students to do with the readings for your section. Consider composing a heuristic for them.

- **Science and Scientific Claims (Biology) (pdf)**
- **Reading Arabic Poetry (pdf)**
- **Tips for Reading Medieval Texts in Translation (Celtic Studies) (pdf)**
- **Becoming an Active Reader (English) (pdf)**
- **Practical Tips for Reading Sociology (pdf)**
- **Reading Actively (and Efficiently) for History Courses (pdf)**

Experienced GSIs and faculty mentors in your department will likely also have suggestions based on their work with students.

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## Science and Scientific Claims

### Assignment (10 pts):

Read the attached article, “106 Science Claims and a Truckful of Baloney,” by William Speed Weed. He is a freelance writer and regular contributor to Popular Science magazine. He lives in San Francisco. This article is found in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2005*, published by Houghton Mifflin.

Observe your surroundings and compile a list of 10 scientific claims that you encounter. They can be from food packaging, the internet, billboards, television commercials, shampoo bottles, etc. Describe each claim, its source, and provide an evaluation of each claim as bogus/false, true, incomplete, misleading, or whatever is an appropriate assessment (as is done in the article). Do some internet (or other) research to evaluate each claim. Be careful to use reliable sources, e.g. peer-reviewed journal articles, fine print, text books, doctors, scientists, and *reliable* internet sources. Cite all sources, please.

**Note:** As with the other writing assignments, you’ll be graded on the: (1) thoroughness of your answers (in this case, your description and evaluation of each claim), (2) writing clarity, and (3) proper use of citations.

Please drop off this assignment into box X in Room Y on Monday, DATE.

### Skills of Critical Reading and Thinking and Rules of Evidential Reasoning

**Table 1.** Skills involved in critical thinking (Wade, 1990).

#### Skills of Critical Thinking Simple Techniques

1. Ask questions: be willing to wonder.	Start by asking “Why?”
2. Define the problem.	Restate the issue several different ways so it is clear.
3. Examine the evidence.	Ask what evidence supports or refutes the claim. Is it reliable?
4. Analyze assumptions and biases.	List the evidence on which each part of the argument is based. The assumptions and biases will be unsupported and should be eliminated from further consideration.
5. Avoid emotional reasoning.	Identify emotional influence and “gut feelings” in the arguments and exclude them.
6. Don’t oversimplify.	Do not generalize from too little evidence.
7. Consider other interpretations and evaluate them with evidential reasoning.	Make sure alternate views are adequately evaluated.
8. Tolerate uncertainty.	Be ready to accept tentative answers when evidence is incomplete, and new answers when further evidence warrants them.

**Table 2.** Rules for evidential reasoning (Lett, 1990), or a guide to intelligent living and the scientific method (Lipps, 1999).

#### Rules for Evidential Reasoning

#### What to Do

1) Falsifiability	Conceive of all evidence that would prove the claim false
2) Logic	Argument must be sound
3) Comprehensiveness	Must use all the available evidence
4) Honesty	Evaluate evidence without self-deception
5) Replicability	Evidence must be repeatable
6) Sufficiency	A. Burden of proof rests on the claimant. B. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. C. Authority and/or testimony is always inadequate.

Reproduced with permission from Lipps, J.H. 1999. This is science! Pp. 3-16 in J. Scotchmoor and D.A. Springer (eds.). *Evolution: Investigating the Evidence*. Paleontological Society Special Publication, vol. 9.

### Reading Arabic Poetry

In this course, we will be reading classical and modern Arabic poems in English translation. These texts might seem very foreign and difficult to understand at first, but you will become more adept at reading these texts as the semester progresses. Along the way, you will have to develop some reading strategies to help you read effectively. What does it mean to “read effectively”? It does not mean you understand everything in the text by the time you finish reading it. Rather, it means you are paying attention to the text and actively responding to it as you read. You are not reading passively, hoping to absorb as much information as you can. Instead, you are doing things like making notes, asking questions, figuring out relationships to outside knowledge. You do not have to have any specific knowledge or understanding to do these things. Here are some tips to get you started:

- Plan on reading the text more than once. The first time you read it, read the poem aloud. This poetry was composed in a highly oral culture, so get a feel for the sound of it. Try to get a sense of the major contours of the text. The second time through, look up unfamiliar words, identify difficult or interesting parts you want to explore further, and get a more detailed idea of what is going on in the text. A third or even fourth reading may be necessary in order to feel familiar with the text, depending on the difficulty and density of it. Doing this work is part of your class preparation.
- Take notes! This means having a hard copy of the text rather than reading it off a screen. It is not enough to highlight or underline important passages. Note-taking can include the following:
  - Listing new vocabulary words and unfamiliar phrases
  - Writing down your observations and questions
  - Composing an outline of the poem’s structure and noting where transitions occur
  - Noting relationships you notice to outside knowledge
  - Highly recommended: write down what each section is about in the margin. This can be a word, phrase, or sentence that will help you sum up and remember the topic of it
- Think and write about your answers to these questions:
  - Who are the characters in the poem? What does the text tell you about them? How does it communicate these things?
  - What genre(s) does this text include? Be specific – e.g. not just ‘poetry,’ but rather ‘erotic love poetry’ or ‘poetry of yearning from a distance’
  - What kind of audience do you think this text was composed for? What kind of background knowledge does this audience already seem to have? (Think about what references the text makes but does not explain.) What pieces of background are familiar/unfamiliar to you?
  - What are the formal features of the text? Does it rhyme? Does it have a particular cadence, rhythm, or meter? Is there a lot of repetition of words or phrases?
  - What strikes you as being important to the text and its characters? Think about what main topics they talk about, discuss, and argue about.
- After reading the text:
  - Write a short summary of what you have read.
  - Identify what you find most interesting, puzzling, likeable, and displeasurable about the text. Think about why you find these aspects interesting, puzzling, likeable, and displeasurable.

## Tips for Reading Medieval Texts in Translation

Medieval Celtic tales often seem like fairy tales to modern readers. Some features seem familiar enough in a fairy-tale setting, but many things just look strange. Our task is to read for the cultural concerns the medieval audience had, not just our own. Once we understand more of the medieval concerns, our feel for the tales will be better informed and more satisfying.

So how do you read for “medieval concerns”?

First off, read actively. Interact with the text; get into a dialogue with it. Get your own copy of the text. Get a pen. Get a notebook. Mark things you don’t understand, write your question or comments on the page or on post-its or in your notebook. (Don’t bother with highlighters. Highlighting is a fairly passive intellectual activity, and it doesn’t help you dig into the text.) What questions do you have about details in the text?

Look up information you need in appropriate reference works. A short list of items available to UCB library users:

Oxford English Dictionary Online

<http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>

Oxford Reference Online—Literature

[http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT\\_SEARCH.html?subject=s13](http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT_SEARCH.html?subject=s13)

Oxford Reference Online—Mythology & Folklore

[http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT\\_SEARCH.html?subject=s17](http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT_SEARCH.html?subject=s17)

Oxford Reference Online—History

[http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT\\_SEARCH.html?subject=s11&authstatuscode=200](http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT_SEARCH.html?subject=s11&authstatuscode=200)

Note that Celticists do not find Wikipedia to be particularly reliable for medieval Celtic studies topics, for reasons we’ll address later in the semester.

Good interpretive questions to start with in a medieval literary text:

Who are the characters? How do you find out about them—what indicators does the text give you about them? (Note that there are no internal monologues and that descriptions tend to be terse and visual.)

What things seem to matter to the characters in the world of the text?

What are the conflicts and the objectives of the characters?

What do you think needs to happen for the plot to resolve? Why?

What part does location or landscape play in the narrative?

Did the narrative end the way you thought it would? What unexpected elements did you encounter?

What do you like about the text? What do you dislike? Why?

After you've read the piece, write a brief summary of it in your notebook. Write down any further questions you have. Question your questions: Why do you find those particular questions important? Do you want definitions or explanations? Does something not make sense from the point of view of your experiences and expectations?

Please do bring these questions up in your homework response and in class discussion.

After reading the entire piece a couple of times, you can return to it with broader questions such as these:

Is there a single plot, or are there multiple strands of plot? What are they? Do they intersect, or do they come up in sequential episodes? Do different episodes comment on one another?

Do the characters do what characters in your culture's stories do? Do they go about attaining their objectives in ways people in your culture do? In what ways do their behaviors or feelings differ?

Different cultures may tell similar stories but talk about quite different issues through those stories. In what ways are the text's issues similar to situations in your culture or in your culture's stories? In what ways are they different? (For example, "The Wooing of Étaín" and the movie *Titanic* are both organized around a love triangle, but the pressures on the love affairs differ markedly from the medieval Irish tale to the modern American film—the former is largely a political tale, while the latter is about individuals breaking free from social constraints.)

Again, write your questions and your reactions.

## Reading Actively (and Efficiently) for History Courses

In this course, you will be asked to read a variety of primary and secondary sources, both for our in-class discussions and for your research project. Some weeks, the assigned readings may seem overwhelming (in both length and content), but if you establish a systematic approach to reading at the beginning of the semester, you will be able to confidently manage these readings and effectively prepare for class.

### Guidelines for Reading:

- Read **ACTIVELY!** Do not be a passive consumer of texts. Some tips for active reading include...
  - Always have pen and paper nearby (or computer, if that is your preference). Don't just record what the author says, though. Record your thoughts on the readings, provide summaries of key sections, write down questions that have not been addressed (or not answered satisfactorily), and so on.
  - Annotate, or otherwise mark the reading up. Do not come into class with a "clean" text. I should see some evidence that you worked through the readings!
  - Read the work from the outside in, and ask questions at every step. Reading a book from start to finish is rarely a useful approach in history classes. Instead, start with the title (why was that title chosen? what does it tell you about the argument that might be made?), then read the introduction, table of contents and conclusion (What are the main arguments of the book? How were these arguments supported? What is the structure of the book? So far, do you agree with what the author has written? Does the argument make sense to you?). Only after reading these sections should you approach the body chapters, and even then you should follow the same protocol (read first and last paragraphs/sections first).
  - The process might be slightly shorter for articles or single chapters, but the process should remain unchanged.
  - **TIP #1:** Unless you think the reading will be vital to your research (and typically you won't know this until you've read quite a few sources), you do **not** need to read a source in its entirety. Go in, get the main ideas,

formulate your own ideas, write them down, and get out.

- **TIP #2:** If you are having trouble with a book, particularly with understanding its “intellectual pedigree,” find a review of the book on JSTOR. Often, these reviews will provide some orientation as to where the book you are reading fits into scholarship and/or a particular intellectual debate.
- Read important sections more than once, especially if something is confusing. Determine why you are confused--is it because you don't know definitions? If so, look them up. Does the confusion stem from not understanding abstract concepts? Take each sentence on its own and try to put it in your own words. If, after several read throughs, the passage is still impenetrable, bring it up in discussion.
- **WRITE:** Write, summarize, chart. You should come away from reading with something tangible to reference later. What form this takes depends on your own preferences and learning style.

### More Specifically...

Though this is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the questions you can ask of your sources, if you can answer all of the questions listed below, you will be prepared to contribute to our class discussion.

### Questions for Secondary Sources

1. Why did the author write this? What is their research question(s)?
2. What is their main argument(s)?
3. How do they support this argument? What types of evidence/source material do they utilize?
4. Does the author make a compelling argument? Why or why not?
5. How does this work fit into scholarship on similar topics? (i.e. Is the author arguing against a previously held belief? Is this a novel approach? etc)
6. How does this work fit into our class, or your research?

### Questions for Primary Sources

1. Who wrote this? Look for some basic biographical information on this person(Wikipedia, for all its flaws, is generally a good source for this type of information. Do **not**--and I can not state this strongly enough--rely on Wikipedia for summaries of readings or critical information).

2. When was it written? What background information do you need in order for the source to make sense?
3. Why was it written, and for whom was it written?
4. What is the argument(s)?
5. What does this source tell you about the author/time period/subject?
6. Does this source support the secondary literature that you have read? Why or why not?

## **Teaching Guide for GSIs**

Each year, a small group of GSIs receive the **Teaching Effectiveness Award**. The Advisory Committee for GSI Affairs receives entries from **Outstanding GSIs** in the form of essays about teaching interventions they came up with to address difficulties that arose in their sections or labs. The Advisory Committee reads through all the essays and chooses the best for the TEA awards. Many of these select essays are about increasing students' motivation to read, or their strategies for reading difficult texts, or their sophistication in analyzing the claims and content of their readings. The links below are to just a few of the **TEA essays that touch on the topic of reading**. Many more are posted at the Teaching Effectiveness Award section of the GSI Center website.

**A New Way to Appreciate Cicero's Style**, Yelena Baraz, Classics

**Teaching Students "Street Smarts" Necessary for Navigating Peer-Reviewed Literature**, Jeffrey Benca, Integrative Biology

**The Theory Scare: Teaching Students How to Grasp Abstract Ideas**, Polina Dimova, Comparative Literature

**Poetry and the Scientific Method**, Hillary Gravendyk, English

**Teaching Critical Skills in Legal Studies**, Sonya Lebsack, Legal Studies

**It Said What?: Reading Critically for Bias and Point of View**, Amy Lerman, Political Science

**Creating Coherence with Conceptual Maps**, Edith Replogle Sheffer, History

**Experiments in Communicative Latin**, William Short, Classics

**Sources into Evidence; or, Rethinking the Research Requirement in Reading and Composition Courses**, Leonard von Morze, English

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