

HOW (AND WHY) TO READ AN ESSAY MORE THAN ONCE

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Rutgers University Writing Centers
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You've probably heard your writing instructor tell you that you should read the assigned essays more than once in order to really understand them. In fact, it takes about four "reads" to really read an essay. But this doesn't mean you need to plow through every single word on every single page four times in a row. Every time you read an essay you'll be at a different stage of the reading/writing process and will be looking for something different from the text. Therefore, you'll use **a variety of reading strategies** to get what you need out of each "read."

Below is a description of these strategies. Try to use them as you work through a new assignment. You can begin to work on any of these "reads" with your tutor in the Writing Center.

"Read" #1:

When to do this "read": Right after you are assigned a new essay to read (within 24 hours)

How long it will take: 20-30 minutes

What you need to do:

- Skim the reading. This means reading through the essay very quickly, maybe without a pen or pencil. Pay attention to any section titles and italicized words in the text. You're reading to get a general idea of what the essay is about.
- Then write down your first impression of the reading. Write about a paragraph; mention at least 3-5 things about the essay you just read. This read should be followed quickly, within a few hours if possible, by "read" #2.

"Read" #2:

When to do this "read": Shortly after "read" #1 and before your next class meeting.

How long it will take: 2-4 hours

What you need to do:

- Read more carefully, this time with pen or pencil and paper. Mark passages in the text that confuse you or make you curious. Mark passages that you don't understand as well as those you understand really well.
- Look up at least 10 words that are unfamiliar to you, especially those that are repeated frequently—they are probably important! Write their definitions in your notebook.
- You may not end up reading the whole essay word by word, but do try to read the whole thing. Read about 4-6 pages more carefully than the rest. Usually, the

first couple of pages, the last 2-3 pages, and a page or two in the middle are good to read more slowly and think about. Come to class with those pages marked up and with questions ready to ask in class.

- You may need or wish to break up this time period into smaller parts, but you should try very hard not to use blocks of time that are too short (10 minutes at a time, repeated several times, makes it too choppy—you won't remember what you read from time to time.) Try for about an hour.

"Read" #3:

When to do this "read": After your class has met again but before you write your rough draft

How long it will take: 1-2 hours

What you need to do:

- Now that you have skimmed the essay, read the essay more carefully in your second read, heard what your classmates have to say, and received some feedback about your questions, read the essay again. This time, re-read the passages you chose in "read" #2 or read new passages that were pointed out by your peers.
- You're not reading the entire essay this time—you are reading selectively so that you can think about particular and specific ideas in the text, and so that you can begin your rough draft more effectively.

"Read" #4:

When to do this "read": After you read your peers' rough drafts.

How long it will take: 2-4 hours

What you need to do:

- By now you have read the essay twice, talked about it in class, written a rough draft, and given/received peer review. Now read the essay again. This time, read it all the way through. Come to class again with more questions and more passages marked as important, puzzling, interesting, etc.

"Read" #5 (optional):

When to do this "read": When you're writing your final draft

How long it will take: It's up to you.

What you need to do:

- You may have seen by now that reading more than once is useful and helps you in your writing. You may wish to read a fifth time. This time, choose how you read: will you read the whole thing again? Will you choose to read new passages (passages you had not marked up) that came up in discussion today? Will you choose to revisit passages you had already marked up, to see if or how you may read them differently? You take responsibility now: how much time do you need? Weave your reading and writing together: read a little; then write a little, then read again, etc.