

## STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE READING

carllewan.com

**Tip #1: Create a consistent guide to identify material based on its level of importance.** This helps you find what you are looking for quickly when you review the material later. I use the following convention for almost every book and article I read. This creates four tiers of significance:

- The least important material is underlined.
- Important material is **highlighted**. I use this most frequently.
- Really important material is **\*highlighted** and has an asterisk next to it. To keep this marking meaningful, I use it sparingly.
- A sticky note on the page indicates material that I want to quickly return to because:
  - I am confused about something.
  - I want to cross-reference the passage with contradictory or supportive information from other materials.
  - I hope to discuss the passage in class because it is so important.
  - Note: some libraries encourage readers to not use sticky notes because the chemicals may be bad for books.

By using this convention, I find that I am less likely to get stuck on difficult material, and that I can efficiently find the information I need later on.

### **Tip #2: Create shortcuts and use symbols.**

→ When the author defines a term, I draw an arrow in the margin. This makes it very easy to come back to key concepts. I use the same symbol when I am reading a novel and the author introduces a new character; this is especially helpful when characters have multiple names or when their relationship to each other is confusing (think about *Things Fall Apart* or *The Brothers Karamazov*). Sometimes I will also create a list at the beginning of the book mentioning the page number where a character first appears.

# Authors who write in scholarly journals and in books published by university presses very often signal the structure of the material by announcing a list. When they do this, I put a number sign (also known as a "hash" symbol) in the margin and then I write (1), (2), etc. next to the items as they appear. This is especially helpful when you are reading difficult material because it is easy to forget what the list is all about if you have been struggling with text for a few pages. In those

cases, you can quickly refer back to the list's origin to remind you what the list was all about in the first place. This also becomes very helpful when you have to write a paper.

*Warning:* while lists can help you organize material and remember it, try to avoid letting them become a substitute for a holistic view of the material. What's the "big idea"?

“ When a passage sounds like I probably want to quote it later, I put quotation marks around it. Choose such quotes very carefully though, and never use one that you cannot explain.

### **Tip #3: Become familiar with the structure of scholarly writing.**

Use the introduction and conclusion to your advantage to find the material that you need. Most scholarly writing follows some variation of this format:

1. Introduction – identifies and justifies a research question and then provides an overview of the essay or book, including a brief thesis statement.
2. Literature review – situates the topic within related research. Who is arguing with whom? When I print hardcopies of journal articles, I usually list key references and names with the page number on the first page. This provides a short cut for fitting material together later.
3. Hypothesis statement – a proposed empirical test of the argument, including the operationalization of the relevant variables. Look for the key concepts and how the author plans to measure them. There is often a discussion of methodology here too.
4. Tests of the hypothesis – or alternatively an elaboration of the argument if there is no explicit “test.” Here you want to be sure you know *how* the author supports her claims. This is followed by interpretation of results and a reference back to the thesis statement.
5. Conclusion – summarizes the material, identifies interesting implications, and outlines possible avenues for future research. Many students rush this when writing their papers, so when you read a good conclusion think carefully about *why* it is good.

Once you become comfortable with this structure, you will be able to read more material with greater efficiency and better retention. You will also be able to understand more material outside the academic discipline that you are most familiar with.