

# GUIDELINES FOR READING NONFICTION

In contrast to reading poetry or most other fiction writing, in which the reader is often asked to do a “close reading” of language, nonfiction reading requires more attention to the big picture. Five important steps to get you used to seeing the big picture are:

- Paying attention to introductions
- Understanding the text’s organization
- “Chunking” the material in the body of the text into subsections
- Looking for key ideas
- Asking critical questions.

## INTRODUCTION

**1. Identify the Introduction.** Word of warning: Most likely, the introduction will be more than one paragraph long. For essay or chapters, it will be most likely two or three paragraphs long, and could be over a page. Often a section heading or a break in the text will let you know that it is ending.

**2. “Chunk” the Introduction.** In other words, go through the introduction, breaking it into subsections and labeling each section in the margin. Some basic material you may find includes:

- Background and/or Context
- Key Question(s)
- Thesis
- Review of Other Takes on the Question
- Key Ideas
- Conceptual or Methodological Framework
- Sources for Study
- Short Summary of Book or Other Comment about Organizations

In a book introduction, often all this material will be present, and quite possibly in this order. Be flexible in your reading and “chunking” of the material. Sometimes

authors will get creative. Identifying this material will gradually allow you to see patterns in introductions. Over time, it will get easier to see how introductions are put together; most importantly, it will help you identify the thesis.

**3. Identify and Draw a Star in the Margin Next to the Thesis.** This may be a challenge, since it most likely will not be at the end of the first paragraph, or even at the end of the introduction (though it may be towards the end). *Make sure not to confuse the thesis with the question.* The thesis will be a sentence (or sometimes, two or three in the case of a book) that clearly states the argument, assertion, or main topic of the essay, chapter, or book. In a book, it might very well appear twice or three times in the introduction, which helps the reader not to miss it. Pay attention to any slight rewordings that may add important information or an elaboration.

## ORGANIZATION

**4. Examine Chapter Titles or Major Section Headings.** What key words are being used? Try to make some guesses about what each chapter might be about. Also, ask yourself, is the book organized:

- Chronologically?
- By Themes?
- By Examples?
- According to stages in an argument?
- A mixture of these?
- With several chapters grouped into books or sections?

Thinking about the organization will get you thinking about the book at a macro level. Ask yourself, how will the chapters or sections work together to form an argument? How are the chapters or sections related to the thesis?

## CHUNKING

**5. Identify the Argument or Main Topic of Each Chapter or Section.** Remind yourself about the thesis of the book. The goal at this point is to figure out how this chapter fits into the overall argument. Is it a background chapter? A methodological chapter? Does it move the story forward structurally or chronologically? Cover a major topic? Or, perhaps, it addresses a different facet of the argument, gives an example, or even takes the reader on a tangent. As always, pay attention to the organization.

**6. Break Up the Material Presented in the Body of the Essay or Chapter.** Don't only pay attention to paragraphs, but try to think in terms of subsections. There may be several paragraphs that cover one particular topic. If you identify these, make sure to write a quick description in the margin.

**7. Look for Lists.** These lists may step you through an argument or a series of examples. The author may be helpful by clearly numbering them, or the author might simply

use transition words such as “next” and “most importantly.”

**8. Stay Alert for Tonal Shifts or Changes in the Direction of the Argument!** Have they been talking about positive effects and then move to negatives? Examining an argument, and now move to a counterargument? Or perhaps they have been very matter-of-fact, and then all the sudden they pull out the poetic or emotive language. Try to mark these shifts in the margin.

**9. Stay Alert for Summaries!** Look for paragraphs in which a longer argument gets summarized quickly and succinctly. Could be at the beginning of the section, but could also happen at the end. Mark these with a star.

## KEY IDEAS

**10. Identify Key People, Concepts, or Events.** If there are any key words you don't know (jargon, foreign words), look them up!

**11. The “So What.”** Conclusions are places where the thesis is restated, and possibly the major points are summarized quickly. This is a good opportunity to make sure that you have the big picture. However, the main thing you want to search for here are is the implication of what you read. Why does the author believe this essay, chapter, or book matters? Are there historical implications? Does it suggest something larger about changes that ought to be made, or simply a different way of thinking about a topic? Or do the results confirm or contradict some larger theory or way of thinking?

## CRITICAL THINKING

**13. Get in the Habit of Asking Questions as You Read.** You want to understand the argument first, but afterwards you might skim the material a second time while thinking about the following:

- Are there unsupported or unconvincing opinions?
- Are there contradictions?
- Is there anything that seems unbelievable?
- Is there anything you agree or disagree with?
- Are there places in the text that are unclear?
- Is there anything the author failed to consider?
- Are there any questions that are unaddressed?

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