Best Practice Tips and Strategies for Academic Reading to Maximize Your Time and Productivity

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**Best Practice Tips and Strategies for Academic Reading to Maximize Your Time and Productivity**

- Highlight words at random. Look for unexpected connections. This can help you remember the text and also create a new text through your reading.

- When doing academic reading, first choose your topic of study; for example, an author.
  - First, read everything that author wrote.
  - Next, read everything that author read.
  - Next, read everything the writers that the author read read.
  - Next, find the writers read by the writers read by the writers the author read. Read their work as well.
  - Congratulations: you are now confident enough to write a short email about some aspect of the topic.

- Remember a book from your childhood: *The Eagle of the Ninth*. One evening you were reading while eating a lobster tail. You were reading and eating, happy as the past can make us be, with one of those cups of butter melted to the color of sunshine.

PHOTO: Brantley Bryant.

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Now, in the past, spill it on the book. Go ahead. Somewhere in the middle. Just make a wave of marigold on that page. Like a savory highlighter pen was broken above it. When you brought the book to class it smelled like butter and lobster.

You felt the worst about those EETS volumes in the graduate reading room. Poor nineteenth-century Middle English nerd labor. Bound poorly and printed on paper almost comically unsuited for handling the passage of time. Brittle, cracky, and thin. Every time you brought a book to the photocopier it snowed words on the way. Chits and squares and flakes falling. Pages increasingly unmoored in their binding, wiggling like plants in weak soil. The destruction flying on high in the night. The end of their bookly combination. The path to forgetting.

There is no “I” in “read.”

Visualize a goose that just pads through your room, honking, at the exact moment when you pick up the book. It’s a solid goose, with brown and white feathers and big, prongy, traffic-cone orange feet. And it’s just LOOKING at you. Let me tell you this bird has mean-ass eyes, like it’s drilling a hole in your pretensions of doing something by reading. Like it knows that reading isn’t work.

“You think you have it hard?” is what this goose’s expression says, “You have no idea.”

“Did anyone ever build a bridge by reading a lot?” the goose asks, “Did they?”
Purchase an array of *Very Short Introductions* to gesture at the topics you feel you owe some delving. These attractively designed volumes are slim, palm-sized. Several of them can be slid into carry-on luggage so that when you are taking a flight or waiting in the airport for hours you can avoid reading them.

Realize that most likely when you die there’s probably a 50/50 chance you’ll forget everything you have read.

Read with earplugs. Read with headphones. Read with an iPod plugged in but no music and nobody says hi. Read with ambient music to smooth out the street noises, the people riotously drunk on the stoop below, the roommate’s 3 AM guitar, the people sad yelling, the people happy yelling. Refuse the refusal of the world to render you as alone as you would wish to be so that you finally could read perfectly without leaving a stain or losing an impression.

Write notes in books to an imagined future reader. Spill your guts. When you lend them to colleagues by mistake this will create some truly wacky moments.

Keep an omnibus of *The Gormenghast Novels* by the side of your bed. Wait until a spring when you move away from a place you love, then leave the book carelessly in a damp garage for several months. The book will begin to bloom, to mustily inflate as if the pages are spreading bark and fungus. Turning the pages becomes like opening a complicated fruit and there are creaking noises. Return it to the side of your bed.
One of your favorite places to read exists only in your fading memory of a small room in a house knocked down more than ten years ago after the people who lived there all died. That room smelled like sunshine heating wood, a sweet faerie kind of smell.

It can be an effective strategy to make a list of books that you would like to read but are certain that you will, in fact, never, ever read.

This strategy will enable you to realize that the book you are now reading purposefully for a project is the most boring of books.

So many other books out there, but this one, wow: what a stinker.

This will allow you a critical detachment, so that it will not be too difficult to check email or look up the history of those things on the front of ships.

What are they called?

Something like ship-figures?

Were they carved by specialists or kind of an amateur thing by the shipmakers?

Or did that vary by time period?

You will find a variety of truisms on the web to the tune of “If you read X hours per day, in Y days you will be a world expert in the field.” It’s a best practice to become deeply angry about these statements. Contemplate the ways that reading is unquantifiably more than the violence of knifing the oyster of expertise from the shell of the pages. Instead, look at the opalescent wonder of the shell. Or, even better, visit the oyster alive underwater, in its own territory,
where you are vulnerable and estranged. Where the water gets into your pages and you bloom.

That one time a friend read “Diving into the Wreck” out loud and the room was all held breath. Readers roam the world in diving gear, dreaming of the next expedition. We recognize each other from our awkward ways of spending time on the surface.

You do a lot of the work of reading in preparation for others. You do a lot of reading things again. It’s important to read everything you assign, every time you assign it. The experience of reading changes, you tell the people you teach, always. You’d be a hypocrite not to note those changes yourself, not to observe the different music of the book when read in a joyous April against that same text skimmed listlessly in a desperate October. One time you don’t read *Beowulf* again before teaching because you know this translation so well. Nice job, buddy. You spend the whole class period feeling fragmented, drifting, unsure of what the text in question is. Where is the bright cup? The dragon is fire and forgetfulness; the dragon is despair. The dragon is the last reading.

Just remember that every second you spend asleep is another second you could be re-reading the famous really long Middle English poem *Piers Plowman*.

Some people really get *Piers Plowman*, but for you it just falls out of your head as soon as you read it.

Even though *Piers Plowman* specialists are nice, you fear their disregard.
Become so focused on reading *Piers Plowman* and being able to remember every detail afterwards that you read with an exhausting intensity. This causes you to go to sleep.

*The Vision You Have While Sleeping*

*In a green glade you are going, unglad of your time*

*Full oft forgetting the facts of Will’s far travels*

*When a goose grim and great gets your attention*

*That honker heaving heavy human words you-wards:*

*“Hey buddy, why so perplexed by a book?”*

Out of the corner of your eye you think you see the goose’s wings spread. Red-gold, covered with scales like armor. You smell soot. But then it’s just a goose again, threatening but comical.

Apologize to every book you tote around with you from place to place. You’ve put them through so much. Ever since that first butter stain! Pen marks. Dog ears, cat ears, tiny folds of mouse ears. Stuffed into boxes, bent, heaved. Awkwardly lurched about. Rings of coffee. Rings of wine. Fine splatters of unruly soups. The terrible arrangements you’ve accidentally devised. Stacked vertically Babel-high then knocked over at 3 AM. Pressed uncomfortably diagonal on shelves each elbowing the other like the angriest commuters going into the future. You are sorry for them, and also a partner in the honest vulnerability of their materiality.
You do a lot of reading for others. Reading as performance, explanation, elaboration. The public and collaborative reading in a group. Piecing through a poem. Asking questions. Reading in tandem. Leading reading. Closing in on close reading. Sometimes you feel vertigo when the dragon weaves in and out of a moment, reminding all present of their contingency.

Remember back to how sublimely organized you were in graduate school. You photocopied whole volumes. You sat at that one cheap walnut desk in the room with the air conditioner and you would type out whole passages word for word, making reading into data entry. A couple years later downloading PDFs became easier. They bought a fast scanner at work. Now you make notes in pen on the texts themselves and keep copies of your own scribblings. You are a diligent self-publisher.

You may have the good fortune to know people who write books. Eventually, your slow and sporadic reading will become not only an intellectual failing but a failure to properly appreciate the work of your friends. Read faster!

Try to recall the plot of a novel you read several years ago every night on a family trip to Disneyland. Write down four key details and see if they match the description of the book you find online. Consider checking in with friends about the duration of their novel-reading memories. How well can they remember the plot, characters, and important passages of books read only once, for fun, after a bright day, to the sound of someone snoring, in a small hotel with plastic icicles in June?
You didn’t read “real books” when you were younger. You read fake books before anything. Fake books you read and to fake books you shall return. D&D rulebooks. Comprehensive episode annotations for *Star Trek*. Overwrought vampires traveling in France. Oh, the high school teachers shook their heads and tried to get you to read something else. Where was the real thing? You chose the books with dragons.

Research shows that scholarly best practice is to read as an extended penance, an apology for even taking on a topic in the first place. Start with recent articles related to the topic, then recent articles tangentially related to the topic. Then suggestions. It is a dialogue with other scholars, but the kind of dialogue that occurs when you enter a gymnasium crowded with people smarter than you and you stand off to the side, clearing your throat. Eventually you scribble a note to someone and they take the note without looking at you and they continue to talk.

There are those who swallow scholarly books. They devour journal issues. They down a whole festschrift like a piece of sushi, chewing awkwardly but getting the job done so fast. To you devourers — cheers! You are magicians and wonders. But you others, you who are easily distracted, you know the feeling. That you are reading this now is amazing. Perhaps take a moment to finally read that piece you have on an open tab in your browser. The goose will watch.

“You think you know so much about dragons,” says the goose, “but you’ve got them wrong. You think you have lived long with them, but your time has been so short.”
The sum of what we destroy is nothing compared to the amount of riches that we guard. We hoard for you. We make sure the past won’t shift out from under us. The dragon is the center of the map.”

What is the first “complicated” book you read? Was it *Dune*? Simple maybe now, but it had heft and a glossary in the back. You read it in a place where you could see the ocean. Pretended the beach sand was Arrakis. Transported into fantasies of heroes.

Read, if nothing else, in alliance with all readers. In alliance with readers whose engagements have been deeply different. In alliance with readers who do not see themselves here. A proposal that reading is as singular as a life or a love affair. A proposal that one “how” of “we read” is how to read together so that none of us is forgotten. We the singular. We the together-estranged. We have all sensed wings.

A quiz. Academic reading, for you, is:

A) A substitute for a passion you once lost.
B) A means to an end.
C) The thing itself.
D) A means to delay the inevitable.
E) You need time to research your answer.

Sometimes reading is an excuse for sitting on the carpet with the rain in the window and and the cat sitting by your shoulder. You are concerned about the cat’s new awkward walk, a sign of age. Cancel more plans.
You have permission to leave a food or drink stain on this book, right here on this side of the page. Choose something good. Make sure to do this before you move to the next (and last) piece of advice below.
“Buddy!” Oh damn it’s the middle of the night and pressing on your chest is a heaviness like a heart attack and you’re wide awake. The goose is waddling right on top of you, thumping down its heavy feet. It smells like mud. “Buddy! Buddy!” The bird is in your face. “Buddy! Remember when you read *The Hobbit* and you never wanted to leave? You set up a tent in the back yard, when your family lived on that base. One of those old lanterns.” This is awkward, and rushed, and the goose clearly has tragically wrong ideas about how to use personal space. But the goose has a point. Reaching back to that memory, you feel sustained in a moment of many troubles and worries and awarenesses of failings. You feel an absolutely pure love. Something that can never fade or be taken away. Not as long as you are here. The goose’s face is next to yours, turned for one eye to stare right at you and you see that its eye is not a regular goose eye but a kind of ridged canyon of a great serpent’s eye, eerie moonscape of a wyrm’s eye looking out from something ancient and wonderful and terrible. “That was reading, that time we first met,” says the goose, “that was reading.”