Guide to Reading Social Science: How to work through long reading assignments

Faced with a long list of readings in any social science field, you need to learn to read extensively as well as intensively; it is rarely practical to read everything word for word and line for line. Although close textual reading and interpretation is part of social science tradition, it is often not possible, especially for introductory and intermediate level survey courses. Instead of trying to read every line and word, consider the following suggestions for more efficient and effective course reading.

I.   **Organize reading over the weeks and months.** Look over the material to be covered (syllabus and tables of contents in assigned books). Estimate the amount of reading for the semester and try to divide the work on a weekly basis. Some weeks may have more reading assigned while other weeks less. Although the assignments vary, try to keep your work and pace steady. It will become less burdensome and easier to manage. Make sure to build into your schedule time for written assignments (including first, second and third drafts with time in between for other people's comments, rethinking and revision).

II.   **Begin any reading assignment by reading the abstract, preface, introductions, and conclusions.** These are often the most important parts of any text because the author often signals his or her major themes and arguments. It is necessary, however, to look over, sometimes very carefully and completely, the central portions of the text to identify the evidence provided for the major themes/ theses. Often, the topic (first) sentences of paragraphs provide the links in the author's argument.

        Inspectional reading (of a book or article):

                a. Look at the title page and the preface
                b. Study the table of contents to obtain a general sense of a book's
                        structure
                c. Check the index
                d. Read the publisher's blurb
                e. Skim the summary statements in the opening and closing paragraphs
                        of pivotal chapters
                f. Formulate what you think you know about this issue. What do you
                        consider the essential points and key explanatory factors?
                        You may know nothing about the topic; use this ignorance
                        to devise a list of what you need the author to tell you in order
                        to be come informed.

III.   **Mechanics of reading and note taking**. Read the text and make marginal notes (on post-its or separate piece of paper) indicating what seemed like the strongest parts of the text. When you have completed a once through the text, go back and take notes in outline form, by paraphrasing sentences or paragraphs until you have reduced the many pages of text to a few pages. (Make sure to keep an accurate citation to the work so that any future use of these notes and paraphrases can be

appropriately cited. You do not want to find yourself engaged in plagiarism.) <u>Do not rely on underlining.</u> <u>Do no rely on highlighting</u>. This is insufficient. In order to "know" a text, you need to convert it into your own words, or your own organization of the text. The text needs to be processed several different ways in your brain. Underlining is passive and does not help you learn the material.

Analytical reading:

a. Classify the book or article according to kind and subject matter. Into what paradigm or research program (genre) does that work fit? What is the book about as a whole?

b. Enumerate the major parts in their order and relations, outline these as you have outlined the whole.

c. Define the specific problem or problems the author has tried to solve. What question does the author claim to address? You might also want to think about how this reading fits into the course. Why did the instructor place the reading at this point in the course? What is the topic on the syllabus? How does this reading provide an answer or information for this topic?

d. What theoretical statements does the author make? A theoretical statement proposes a relationship. For example, structural theories of deviance suggest that deviance (that which is to be explained) is a consequence of the structure (organization of the parts) of a society. In other words, social structure produces deviance.

e. What are the concepts and variables used? . Become familiar with the author by defining key words. Know the details of the argument. In the example above: what is social structure? What is meant by deviance? Do structural theorists/ writers assume the reader knows what is meant by social structure? Do you need to find out what this means in order to understand the reading? (see

f. How does the author's argument/ position compare with that of others who address the same question or related questions? Where are the points of similarity and difference?

g. What normative statements (value judgments) does the author make? What values does the author assume readers will share? What assumptions does the author make that may be contestable?

h. What is the author's methodology? (Here you should be concerned not only with the methods used but the kinds of arguments implied or given about what methods are more or less appropriate.) What constitutes evidence in this reading? Know the author's arguments by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences.

i. Determine which of the problems the author has solved and which she has not; and of those not solved, decide which the author knows he has failed to solve. If you disagree with the author, on what basis do you rest your disagreement? Is the author uninformed, misinformed, illogical, imprecise, or incomplete? Criticize fairly; do not pass judgment based on personal opinion, taste, or preference. Is the argument internally consistent? Does the evidence (both that presented by the author and other evidence in the field) support the argument?

IV. Abstract (use this format for notes to be handed in each week).

Full Bibliographic citation.
Thesis: 1-2 sentences.
Details: 3-4 well constructed paragraphs.
Themes: 3-4 bullet points defining and using authors key concepts

V. I recommend students consult and use Lee Cuba, <u>A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science</u>, second edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) for additional instruction in reading and writing social science, abstracting and summarizing readings. You will find this book helpful for other subjects as well.

VI. Samples

I will place on the course web site examples of abstract writing and note taking.