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READING PRACTICES

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We are used to thinking of reading as a process of extracting information from a book or article; the objective is to “absorb” as much as possible from the text. I propose here a new interpretation, which can help you increase your competence at observing the world. Once you master the three practices suggested below, you will find yourself much more skilled than the average reader. They will also help you as a writer, since your own readers will be asking questions similar to the ones you have become skilled at answering.

Here’s the interpretation. Think of reading as a special kind of conversation you are engaged in with the author. Think of the author as one of many speakers in a larger sweep of history in which there are many speakers, each building on and reacting to other speakers. Think of that sweep as revealing many debates and controversies, an unfolding community process. To see the historical movement of the field, we cannot rely on one author; we must read many, including different speakers at different times. Only after you have partaken of many snapshots of the large network of speakers and conversations of the field can you develop your own sense of the way it has evolved and the directions in which it is moving. This will take some time and will require some patience.

When reading, keep in mind that you are listening to another human being. Observe whether that person provides assessments that are supported or unsupported. Look at the authority from which the person speaks. Consider the competence the person has or does not have.

Most reading is preparation for action. You can cultivate three reading practices to make this effective. **First**, when you approach any text, articulate the major concern or question that you bring to the reading. When done, reflect on how the text illuminates that concern. (In this course, the major concern will almost always be to learn material or to deal with some issue in your current employment.) **Second**, get into the habit of asking and answering these five questions:

1. What are the author's main claims?
2. What grounding does the author provide for the claims? Is the grounding sufficient to convince you of the claims? If not, what's missing?
3. What was the author's big assessment about the world that led to writing this text?
4. What action is the author seeking to make possible by this text?
5. What possibilities are opened or closed for you in reading this text? (Answer this relative to the concern or question you brought to the reading.)

Third, read the text three times. The first is a quick perusal, where you read only the headings, the captions, the introduction and conclusion, and a few selected sentences; the point is "reconnaissance", to familiarize yourself with the author's territory in broad outlines. The second reading is the deliberative, thoughtful one in which you ask questions, make notes, underline, and take whatever time you need to appropriate the author's argument. The third reading is quick, a summary skimming to revisit the points in the text where the main claims are made.