Reading Course Texts

Students often have trouble becoming strategic readers of historical monographs. On the flip side, many of us who are strategic readers don't remember how we became so. To help you think about the way you are approaching course texts, I've compiled the following suggestions, one from a general guidebook about history education, the other from a list generated by one of my colleagues. While I hope that they all are, frankly, obvious, they may help some of you become more efficient and effective readers. Good luck!

Jules Benjamin, "How to Read a History Assignment"

Reading history can be a satisfying experience, but to enjoy the landscape you must first know where you are; that is, you must have a general sense of the subject and of the manner in which it is being presented. If you begin reading before you get your bearings, you may become lost in a forest of unfamiliar facts and interpretations. Before beginning any reading assignment, look over the entire book. Read the preface or introduction. This should tell you something about the author and his or her purpose in writing the work. Then read the table of contents to get a sense of the way in which the author has organized the subject. Next, skim the chapters themselves, reading subheadings and glancing at illustrations and graphed material. If you have the time, preread sections of the book (especially the introductory and concluding chapters) rapidly before reading the full work.

After you have scouted the ground, you will be ready to read. By this time, you should be familiar with the topic of the book (what it is generally all about), the background of the author (politician, journalist, historian, eyewitness, novelist, etc.), when it was written (a hundred-year-old classic, the newest book on the subject), how it is organized (chronologically, topically), and most important of all, its theme and conclusions. The theme of a book is the principal point that an author wishes to make on the subject. …Most authors set out their theme in a preface or introduction. If you understand the principal point the author is trying to make, then the organization and the conclusions of the work will become clear to you. The author will be organizing evidence and drawing conclusions to support the theme. By the way, if the theme is not clear or the evidence is not supportive of it, then it is not a good history of its subject no matter how many facts it contains. The ability to spot such weaknesses and describe them is part of learning history too.


Omar Valerio-Jiménez, Suggestions on How to Skim an Article or Book Chapter:

1. Read the title. Does the title tell you what the article is about?
2. Read the first paragraph(s) to determine the purpose of the article. You might have to read more than the first paragraph to understand the purpose of the chapter. What is the author’s goal in writing this article?
3. Read the topic sentence of each paragraph in the body of the article. If a topic sentence interests you or is confusing, read the entire paragraph carefully.
4. Pay attention to any subtitles found in the article for clues about the purpose of each of the article’s sections.
5. Read the conclusion. The conclusion might be found in the last paragraph or in the last few paragraphs.
6. When you read the article, imagine that you are having a discussion with the author. Ask questions about the author’s statements and ideas, and see whether the answers satisfy you.
7. Pay attention to the order in which the author presents ideas. Ask why the author chose that particular order and why so much time was given to certain points.