

# How to Read Critically



## and Interact with Texts

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Reading critically is a different act than skimming or even reading carefully. It involves having a dialogue in your head with the author, relating the text to other experiences, and formulating your own ideas about the text. How you read will largely determine how well you understand the ideas and will be able to use them in graded work. While this handout is about reading literature, other “texts” are read critically as well (e.g., film, still images).

### Making Notes in the Margin

Read with a pen or pencil in hand and a notebook by your side (highlight marker optional), and be willing to fill your book with notes. If you want to sell back a book that the professor uses only periodically, then photocopy the pages of reading so that you can mark them.

Suggested Marks	Use	Text	Margin
<b>MAIN IDEAS</b>  <u>Underline</u> OR  <b>Highlight</b> + key words in margin	Underline or highlight text that contains the main ideas and write key words in the margins that will trigger those ideas when you review the text later. You can also write some of your own ideas about the text.	Book Text Underlined  . . . <u>life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles.</u> <sup>1</sup>	Your Margin Notes  <i>spectacles - television?</i>
<b>NUMBERED IDEAS</b> ① + ① note	For numbered ideas, write a number in the text and then the same number in the margin, with a key word.	① The first step to earning good grades is attending class.	① <i>attend</i>
<b>QUOTES</b> <u>underline</u> +  + note	Develop special marking for exact quotes that might be used later in a paper (so that you can easily find them later). For example, highlight or underline the text and make a star in the margin, along with a note.	<u>When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings.</u>	 <i>images as real beings</i>
<b>QUESTIONS</b> } + ?	Bracket passages that you don't understand and write a question mark in the margin. You can ask your professor in class to explain.	The spectacle is <i>capital</i> accumulated to the point that it becomes images.	? <i>spectacle as capital</i>
<b>NEW VOCABULARY</b> Circle word + define	Circle words that are unfamiliar, look them up, and write a quick definition or synonym in the margin.	proletarianize	<i>turn into laborers</i>

<sup>1</sup> Most examples in this handout are from Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), "Chapter 1: Separation Perfected," translated by Fredy Perlman and John Supak (Black and Red, 1977), located online at the *Situationist International Archive*: [http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub\\_contents/4](http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub_contents/4).

## In Your Notebook

### 1) Write Your Own "Cliff's Notes."

For example, if you're reading a Shakespeare play, jot down notes about the basic plot as you go, as well as interesting quotes and ideas. If you're reading an article, try to put the ideas in your own words (see below).

Text Example	Summary in Your Notebook
<p style="text-align: center;">5</p> <p>"The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a <i>Weltanschauung</i> which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified."</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Worldview</i></p> <p><i>presented as an object</i></p>	<p>Pg 1, Section 5: <i>I think the author is saying that it's easy to see the spectacle as just abuse or deception in mass media, but the spectacle has actually become our whole "reality"—the way we view the world. For example, TV news becomes our reality even when events aren't really happening to us. We don't even think how weird it is that we look at TV as "reality" because it has become our world view.</i></p>

### 2) Relate the Ideas to Your Own Life (notes, blogging, discussion, journaling, etc.)

We remember things we personally care about. One reason many professors devote their entire lives to seemingly arcane areas of study is that they have developed an insatiable interest for the subject. See if you can tap into your own interests and passions as you read. Imagine you are having a conversation with the author and are sharing your ideas.

#### Relating it to My Life

*I remember watching the O.J. Simpson trial in real time, and it was as if it became part of my "real life." Not only that, but it almost didn't matter in the end what really happened to the victims—the thing that mattered was what happened in the trial (the "spectacle"). That became the "reality." I think that's why the family of victims are always trying to tell us "Remember my daughter was a real person," because our "reality" is that they are just part of the spectacle.*

### 3) Explore Your Own Ideas and Freewrite

Feel free to agree or disagree with an author and move beyond what you've read and develop your own ideas and theories, even as you respect an author's perspectives. Try to relate your reading to other readings and experiences you have had outside of this class.

#### Exploring My Own Ideas

*I would say these ideas apply to aspects of life we might not even think about (the spectacle becoming reality). For example, do we really know what romance is apart from what we have seen in TV and the movies and photographs? "The spectacle represents the dominant model of life" (1). At the same time, the idea of the spectacle might be kind of cynical. I mean, is there a positive place for media, or where do we draw the line? Or maybe that's the point—the media doesn't let us draw a line—our lives are invaded already. It's as if we're living inside the Matrix. Question: Is this like Baudrillard's idea of the hyperreal?*

### 4) Developing Notes Into Essays



After you've spent time freewriting, if you need to develop an essay in traditional form, look at your notes to get a sense of what topics interest you, what ideas might be organized together, and which you're going to weed out (you probably won't be able to use all of the ideas you've written about). Focus on developing a main idea for the paper in the form of a thesis statement. Then, think of the main reasons why you believe your thesis statement is true—those "reasons" can become topic sentences of body paragraphs. Consider making an outline like the one below and using familiar composition strategies such as definition, description, classification/division, process/analysis, comparison/contrast, etc.

#### EXAMPLE

Thesis statement	Many philosophers discuss visuality in relationship to power.
Topic Sentence for Body Paragraph #1	Foucault saw the Panopticon as a model for automating power through visibility.  (After explaining Foucault's model, you could relate it to contemporary society, refute it, incorporate other readings, etc., so long as you support your ideas.)
Topic Sentence for Body Paragraph #2	Guy Debord wrote about a "society of the spectacle."
Topic Sentence for Body Paragraph #3	Debord's spectacle is similar to Baudrillard's "hyperreal."

Notice that each topic sentence above supports the thesis and becomes a reason why you believe your thesis statement is true. Try not to merely summarize what you've read—connect ideas within the text and even branch off into your own ideas about how an article might apply to the world around you and to other things you've read and observed. Personal narratives can be included in some essays (consult with individual professors to find out their requirements for the assignment). The more meaningful connections you are able to make, the more meaningful your essay will probably become.

### **5) Look for support quotes.**

As you write, review your notes to find the important ideas and quotes from the text(s) to incorporate. If you have made a special mark (such as a star) in the margin to denote interesting quotes, then you will easily be able to find them and incorporate them. Find out what form of documentation your professor requires (for example, MLA, APA, etc.).

### **6) Participate in discussion groups outside of class.**

Congresswoman Barbara Jordan said that discussion groups were key to her survival in law school at Boston University, as they allowed her to talk through difficult readings and ideas at a time African-Americans otherwise had limited social support systems in higher ed. Jordan later became the first African-American woman in the Texas Senate and the first African-American woman from the South to be elected to Congress. Dialogue outside of class can help you interact with ideas and develop your own. Consider getting together with classmates, utilizing class blogs and discussion boards (you can even create your own blog at [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com)).

### **7) Draft and Revise.**

Most essays require many drafts and revisions. Ask classmates to read your work and provide feedback--and consider visiting the Saunders Writing Center.

### **8) Other Kinds of Responses**



Even though the conventional essay is the traditional mode of responding to texts in academic environments, it is not the only mode. Other responses might include diagrams, web site links, poetry, performance, etc. "Creative" work is often even incorporated into essays. For example, Mark Strand's essay entitled "Hopper," which analyzes the famous painting *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper, begins with a personal exploration: "I often feel that the scenes in Edward Hopper paintings are scenes from my own past."<sup>2</sup> These personal memories then lead to analysis of how we might view Hopper's work spatially and generationally. Even "creative" responses (e.g., poetry, satire, performance) can have rigorous content. Joyce Carol Oates' poem entitled "On Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, 1942" is both creative and critical--it engages us in commentary about the artwork and "makes us think." Other creative responses might be less analytical and more "inspired by" a work (e.g., creating satire).

How do you know which kind of response to choose? Consider audience, purpose, and assignment requirements. Also, check with your professor about specific criteria for assignments. Keep in mind that creative work can be subjected to rigorous criteria, just as essays are. All work becomes viewed in the context of standards within fields of study, other similar works in that field, and specific learning objectives for a course.

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<sup>2</sup> An image of Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks" (1942), along with Mark Strand's essay entitled "Hopper" and Joyce Carol Oates' poem entitled "On Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, 1942," have been posted at [www.julietdavis.com/COM232/hopper.pdf](http://www.julietdavis.com/COM232/hopper.pdf). The pages are from *Picturing Texts* by Lester Faigley, Diana George, Anna Palchik, and Cynthia Selfe (W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), pp. 116-123.