

Reading Difficult Texts
(adapted from *Engaging Ideas* by John Bean)

1. Read a complicated text more than once. Think of a first reading as parallel to a rough draft in writing.

- a. Make sure that a “voice” is in your head when you read.
- b. Encourage that “voice” to interact with the text by asking questions.
- c. Express disagreements with the text.
- d. Link the text with other readings and/or your personal experience.
- e. Avoid “speed reading.”

2. Adjust reading for different purposes.

- a. Some reading tasks take skimming.
- b. Some reading tasks require close scrutiny of detail.
- c. Some reading tasks aren’t obvious; you must read for inference or application.

3. Perceive the structure of the argument.

Chunk complex material into discrete parts with describable functions.

- Examples: “This part gives evidence for a new reason.”
“This part summarizes an opposing view.”
“This part maps out an upcoming section.”

4. Assimilate the unfamiliar.

Note the “cognitive egocentrism” effect. We have trouble walking in the shoes of persons with unfamiliar views and values. Watch yourself when you automatically close down.

5. Understand a text’s rhetorical context.

- a. See the text as an ongoing conversation.
- b. Note and learn the political biases of different magazines and newspapers.
- c. Learn the varying degrees of scholarly prestige that different journals and presses have (like the University of Berkeley Press versus the University of Wyoming Press).
- d. Pay attention to the reputation of the author.

6. See yourself in a conversation with the author.

- a. Be an open-minded believer who can succumb to the text’s power.
- b. Be a skeptical doubter who can find weaknesses in the text.