

## How I came to understand the benefits of active reading

I found it quite shocking when a professor of mine said to us in class, "You didn't come here to read every word." He then proceeded to tell us that if we were just picking up the readings for the class and reading them from start to finish then we were doing something wrong. I thought that was what I was supposed to be doing. I expected and trusted authors to tell me what they were saying in the order that made the most sense. I thought that I wouldn't fully understand what I was being told if I didn't read every word.

Previously, I had independently come across the idea of participating actively in reading in D.O. Hebb's Textbook of Psychology, where he talks about study skills (pp. 4-5, 108-111 of the 3rd edition). I found Hebb's suggestions to be quite interesting because they helped me see how you could be more critical and active about reading. I was especially intrigued with the idea that you could get more out of a reading by skimming it many times than by reading it carefully once. But, I wasn't convinced to use this method except for instances when I was falling asleep or daydreaming while trying to read. That was the only benefit of being active that Hebb managed to convince me of. After trying it a few times, I found that it didn't feel as economical to skim through a reading several times. But mostly I was unconvinced because I didn't understand why I should guess what I was being told, when I could just be told.

I became convinced only after seeing the benefits of active participation in the classroom setting in my professor's class. This professor had a question-driven style of holding class, where he wouldn't lecture, he would only answer questions. This showed me the power of asking questions of someone you can engage in a dialogue with. I was then able to transfer this idea to asking questions of the words that an author has written. It really helps to be asking something of the material that you're trying to learn or that you're reading. Being more engaged in the process means that you are conjuring up more relevant thoughts from your own experience. It might be useful to reflect on how much of your relevant knowledge is active when you read.

But even after becoming convinced, it still wasn't and isn't easy to act accordingly. Old habits die hard, and it requires more energy to be active. To combat this, I sometimes force myself to read only the first sentence of each paragraph. The first time I tried this was just before a meeting with a reading group to discuss an article. I often didn't have time to do the reading before meeting with this group, and I used to just start from the beginning and read every word until I ran out of time. You can imagine (or experiment with this for yourself) the difference between the two methods in how well I was able to follow the discussion of the article; it was very convincing. So, I realized that being more selective and active about reading is a good "anytime strategy." What I mean by that is that the strategy helps you make the best use of your time no matter when you stop. A related story that I find helpful is about the behavior of kids in museums. When arriving at a museum, some kids run all around the museum first, much to the dismay of the folks who brought them. But, it turns out that they are not necessarily just being wild

and rambunctious. This gives them a chance to get an overview of what there is to look at and what they might want to spend more of their limited time on.

Another reason forcing myself to scan isn't easy is that I still feel a compulsion to read every word. I still fear that I might miss out on something. But, there is a difference between the words on the page versus the meaning that they are intended to convey. Often you can understand the meaning (or as much of it as you care to understand) without reading every word. When you have limited time, reading all the words on the page from the beginning to a premature stopping point makes it less likely that you'll get the message than being more selective and active about it. It is interesting to think about what you would do if you had all the time in the world versus what you would do if you only had a limited amount of time. How much more do you gain by spending more time?

I have also come to understand the benefits of being selective about the order and extent to which I read particular sections on my first pass through an article. In terms of time effectiveness, it is easier to understand what you are reading if you see where the author is going to go with the ideas that you are reading (because you skipped ahead and found out). I used to patiently wait for the author to tell me as I read the article from start to finish. Now, I realize that there are benefits to guessing what I am being told as I scan quickly through an article. I find out more about my own ideas about the subject and about what I expect. What do I think the author needs to do to make a good argument? What is the logical next step for me? This helps me be more critical when I am reading.

I don't always remember that authors are just human beings like the rest of us. I don't have to believe what they are saying, and I don't need to read the article in the way that they intended me to. They can't know what my purpose in reading their article is, nor what I already know. Even if they do have a good idea about potential audiences, they still can't accommodate all the possibilities in their writing. Furthermore, important pieces of writing can also be deeply flawed. Sometimes you have to see past the author's noisy and biased presentation to find the significance of an article. Sometimes there is a gem buried somewhere that the author didn't emphasize, but is particularly meaningful to you. Sometimes authors organize an article in a way that isn't particularly helpful or include sections that aren't worth your while to read. I try to keep this all in mind when I get tempted to read an article with great care.

There are still times, of course, when I do read every word in the order they come in. Some writing doesn't lend itself to being read any other way, and sometimes that's just how I want to read a particular piece of writing. But, I've now realized that other alternatives often serve me better.