Active Reading

“Before you can write well, you must read well.”

1. strategies for active reading          2. stages of active reading          3. writing a critique

Passive Reading: reading done without an active, critical mind.  
Active Reading: using certain techniques to more fully engage with a text.  
Annotating: making notes while you read.  
Summary: rewriting something in your own words (often without an opinion).  
Topic: the general subject of a passage.  
Main Idea: the key concept of the passage.  

The reading you do for academics is quite different from any reading you do for fun.  Reading for pleasure is often done passively, without intentions to organize the writer's ideas or, more importantly, your responses to those ideas.  You see, meaning isn't always understood the same way by different people, so meaning is most important in reading since it is what distinguishes the Main Idea of a passage from its General Topic.

*Keep Your Focus on the “Meaning”*

Academic reading should always be done actively.  When reading actively, you become more engaged with a piece and you retain more info.

Active reading will save you time:  
• You won’t have to read something over and over again to get the author’s main idea.  
• By writing little notes in the margins while you read (annotating), you’ll retain a lot more info when you go back and review.  
• If you’ve annotated, you can simply go back and read your notes, in your own words, to help gather your thoughts on the author’s main idea (meaning).

Below are some strategies for active reading.  Though all are important, the most important are the first two.  Never read a selection without a pencil in your hand.  If it’s in your hand you’ll use it.  If it’s not, you won’t.  Trust me.  Human beings are inherently lazy creatures.  You might disagree, but just look and see how many notes you take if you’re not actually reminding yourself to do so.

Also, make sure you annotate as you read (write notes to yourself in the margins).  It really does help to take a second after a few paragraphs and write a few words to remind yourself what’s being discussed.  These annotations provide a good variety of points to keep in mind while planning an essay.
1. strategies for active reading:

1. *Always read with a pencil in hand!*
2. use that pencil to annotate
3. listen to what you’re reading – consider yourself in a dialogue with the author
4. compare authors’ ideas with what you know
5. question statements made by the author
6. identify important ideas and respond with your own
7. look up words you don’t know immediately.

*Helpful Hints for Annotating:*

Key Points to note in a passage: “3 key ingredients of comprehension”

1. topic
2. main idea
3. supporting details

*The Topic should not be mistaken for the Main Idea.* The topic is just the subject being discussed, and the main idea can be the opinion or feeling about the topic.

2. stages of active reading:

1. *prep* (access prior knowledge -- what do you know about this subject?)
2. *read* (annotate)
3. *re-read* (annotate)
4. *review* (develop your own responses from your notes)

By reading actively, you are loading up with facts, opinions, and supporting details (quotes/data/statistics) that you will then use to build a more well-developed, convincing essay. The better you organize your responses to readings (analyzing your research), the easier it will be to develop and support your essay’s main idea, or your thesis.

To *prep* for the selections in academic textbooks, just read the many response questions and author info/bio included with the passage.

Read them all *before* you read the selection. Some think this is somehow cheating -- just because the questions are often placed at the end of a passage, that doesn’t mean you have to wait until you’ve finished reading to use them to your benefit. All you’re really doing is setting the playing field, preparing yourself for what’s to come.

*These questions are included to get you thinking about the main idea of the passage. If you read them first you’ll be more apt to make a note of important parts.*

Then, go ahead and *read* the selection. And, yes, when done reading the essay it helps to *re-read* it.
Just like listening to music or watching a movie, the more often you hear or see it, the more of the fine points you absorb. Think about listening to a song -- do you really hear and understand all the lyrics the first time you listen to it? Probably not, and the same goes for reading. You miss a lot the first time you read something, so reading again always helps.

And don’t forget to annotate. Some like to annotate the first time and simply read through the second time, using their annotations as memory enhancers. Others like to do the opposite. Decide for yourself. Try different methods and see what works best for you.

Finally, review all the notes you’ve made in order to fully comprehend the author’s main idea.

3. writing a critique

Think about this:

“The man who does not read … has no advantage over the man who can’t read…”

-Mark Twain

Before even considering writing, you must ask yourself if you read at all. If you don’t you are at a disadvantage, but not one that can’t be overcome. Throughout this course, you’ll be reading several selections (articles, essays, etc.). These selections will take you into an arena of discussion with your peers (blogs).

There you’ll get out some ideas and help you develop ideas to include in your own essays. That will go a long way in building a written piece (your essay) that will articulate your claim (main idea) based upon what you have comprehended from the selections read.

- good reading = comprehension
- good writing = articulation

A clear, well-articulated claim or thesis (the basis of all academic writing) is often based upon a combination of a writer’s beliefs, of a writer’s knowledge gained from research done, and of a writer’s personal responses and insights (gained from reading or from your life). It’s difficult to articulate an opinion that others will consider valid if that opinion is based on generalizations, assumptions, and hearsay -- not on facts, data, and research.

That’s where the reading comes in. Reading becomes your education. You can support your thesis by responding to what other professionals, writers, and experts have said about a subject. When learning about or just discussing a topic, an initial gut reaction is formed. Jot down your response (annotate) so you can refer to it at a later date.

- Just remember that your initial reaction may change after learning more about your subject -- that’s perfectly normal. Be open to that change in order to fully absorb, or comprehend all the information presented to you.
To help fully comprehend a selection and your responses, it often helps to write an informal critique after reading. Below are the two main components often incorporated into a critique of no less than one full page:

1. **Summary** (paraphrase in your own words)
2. **Analysis & Response** (your reaction)

**Summary:**

When finished reading, rewrite in your own words what you think the author is trying to say. Often, the summary need only be a paragraph or two. Sometimes it may need to be longer, depending on the length of the original selection. Write freely and openly in a casual style. Write in the language you’re most familiar with. Even though you think you may have a grasp on the main point the author is trying to make, you will always gain a better insight when rephrasing and summarizing in your own words. This isn’t simply busy work – it will truly help you gain a better understanding of the author’s meaning.

**Analysis & Response:**

React with your own ideas here. Is the author’s claim legitimate? Are there any discrepancies or untruths in the piece? Are there parts of the essay that are convincing, or that merit further discussion? Even the best intentions can end up in faulty assumptions, documentation, or even interpretation. Take the time to write a paragraph or two analyzing the author’s claim and how successful it is in convincing an audience. Write freely and openly in a casual style.

This is also where you respond to the author with your own ideas. When writing, you should consider yourself to be in a conversation with the author. Though you can’t respond directly to him or her, you can respond on your own terms and on your own pace. How do you feel about his or her ideas? Do you agree or disagree? Why? Go into detail about how the selection made you feel. Articulate any insights gained from the writing, or any particularly poignant spots. Again, write freely and openly in a casual style.

After you have gotten your initial and rough ideas out onto paper, you can incorporate them into a formal critique: simply clean everything up logically and grammatically and type it up. Label each section to help organize your thoughts better.

Students often pull many ideas verbatim from these critiques to be used as development for their essays. If you take these critiques seriously, much of the information can be useful as your personal insight and analysis, a valuable component in developing essays.

*See sample critique below:*
Sally Student

February 14, 2012

English 1, #55532

Critique of “The Miseducation of Hip-Hop”

Summary:

This article describes the disconnect between the younger generation, influenced by rap music, and the older generations who misunderstand and condemn rap music. It is a persuasive essay based on personal testimonies, with quotes from college students and faculty. Some believe today’s generation is influenced by rap music which is taking away from their studies and ultimately, their futures. The older generation are making generalizations about an entire genre, claiming it is “heartless, valueless, nihilistic, and certainly anachronistic if not atheistic,” in other words, “downright filth.” And Jamilah does provide evidence that rap music can occasionally be “bad” when students fail to dress to impress, claiming they would rather be true to themselves and continue “keepin’ it real.” The solution Jamilah offers to this and other problems related to music is to incorporate education about hip-hop culture into academia so that they learn about this influential music through other means besides the media.

Analysis & Response:

The problem with the older generation’s position is that it is not only antiquated, but it also leads to stereotyping. Providing quotes from both college professors and students made this article identifiable and realistic. I agree with the idea that “part of the reason why there is such a generational gap is because so few educators make an effort to understand the times in which they live.” So many teachers fail students in that manner when they refuse to catch up with modern society, embrace new technologies, and stay current with popular culture. While learning
about the past is important in history classes, other classes need to be based in the present. Students can only identify with and learn from material that is relatable and realistic to them, which means talking about events in today’s society. I believe that if there were more classes about popular culture and music like hip-hop that more people would understand this genre of music better and let it affect them in appropriate ways. And I don’t agree with those students who believe showing up to an interview in baggy pants and a do-rag are “keepin’ it real.” I think that we all have to learn when wearing certain clothes and speaking certain ways are appropriate and when they are not. The failure to recognize this is the downfall of hip-hop’s influence. That is why including courses in analysis and history of such music genres would allow students to obtain a greater appreciation and different outlook on society and their futures in it.

Work Cited: