Active Reading 2: Transcript

Slide 1:

Thank you for watching this Purdue OWL vidcast on Active Reading: Approaching a Book.

Slide 2:

In graduate school, you have an astronomically high reading load. Especially if you are in a Humanities field, you may be expected to read a large number of books, both for coursework and for your research.

Before you even start reading a book, there are some steps you can take to choose what to read, find out what's useful in the book *for you*, and orient yourself within the book. This will help you to choose what to read, then strategically focus your reading within a book.

In this video, we'll be talking about tools for efficiently familiarizing yourself with academic books, and especially for monographs, another word for an academic book written on a single topic.

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First, let's talk about choosing where to start.

If you're at the beginning of a project and have a whole stack of books on a topic, you might be figuring out what to read first. You might be tempted to start reading chronologically, but doing just the opposite can save you time.

If you're lucky, you might have a book that's written as a methodological introduction to the field or a literature review. These often have titles along the lines of *Introduction to Public History* or *Social Psychology: A Short Introduction*. These are usually only worth your time if they're relatively recent. These kinds of books usually provide an overview of some of the most important other works in the field. That means that first of all, you'll know what else you need to read. Second of all, you might get enough information that you don't actually need to read all of the older works, or you can skim them quickly.

If you don't have an introduction to the field, you can still use a similar strategy by reading one of the most recent books first. Look in the introduction for a survey of other works on the topic.

We'll talk more about reading the introduction in a minute.

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Now, let's talk through some tools that will help you to digest a book and focus your reading.

The first tool at your disposal is book reviews. These are academic reviews published in peer reviewed journals, not reviews on places like Amazon or Goodreads. Most significant academic books will have at least one review published within a few of years of the book's release. You can find these reviews on academic databases like jstor or your library website.

Reviews are typically 1-2 pages long and are written by a scholar in the same field. A typical review includes a summary of the book's argument, an evaluation of the book's strengths and weaknesses, and a discussion of its contribution to the field. This is a powerful shortcut to understanding what a book is about and what's important about it. You can use a review to decide if a book is worth reading for your research. And particularly if the review contains an outline of the different chapters, it can also help you figure out which sections of the book you want to read.

Keep in mind that your own evaluation of the book may differ from the reviewer's. But a review can help you to identify some key questions you may want to keep in mind as you read. It is NOT cheating to use a review to help you prepare for class or inform your analysis of a book. Just make sure that if you're depending on a review's interpretation in your own writing, that you cite it. And make sure you're being intellectually honest by doing your own reading and analysis before you cite a reviewer's critique.

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Once you decide to read a book, the first thing you'll want to check out is the table of contents.

A quick look through the table of contents can give you a general sense of the book's subject, argument, and organization. It can also help you decide which chapters you'd like to read in detail. I like to place a flag sticky note next to the chapters I know I want to read.

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Another great tool in academic books is the index. The index is located at the back of the book and contains a list of key terms, plus the page numbers that include those terms. Most indices are organized alphabetically, but some may include different sections such as “people” or “places.”

Try looking up a couple of key terms related to your research topic. This is an easy way to see whether a book contains information relevant to your work, although you may want to try a few different terms before casting a book aside. If most of the page numbers related to your terms are located in the same chapter (or couple of chapters), that’s a good clue that you should read that chapter.

Sometimes, you may need a book for one particular kind of information. For example, maybe you just need to know the backstory of one historical event. You can use the index to find where the author discusses that event. You might need to read just a few pages to find exactly what you need, then move on to something else.

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When you’re trying to read an academic book efficiently, the introduction is your best friend. In the introduction, most authors summarize their argument and methodology, tell you why their ideas are important, and briefly summarize each chapter. They may also review some previous work on the topic. This makes the introduction a great tool to shape your reading.

First, the introduction often provides the clearest statement of the author’s argument. It’s worth noting that sometimes a book does not quite live up to the author’s representation of it within the introduction—it’s your job as a thoughtful reader to evaluate the book’s effectiveness in your closer reading. But knowing the author’s intentions is in itself important. If you only need to know the big-picture argument of a book and its place in the literature, reading the introduction might be enough.

You can use the chapter summary to decide which chapters you’d like to read in more detail. From there, you can go on to read more closely and take notes.

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Check out the rest of our videos about active reading for other strategies for reading academic books and articles. In another video, we discuss strategies for skimming within the body chapters of a book.

You can also find more information about graduate writing on the Purdue OWL website.

Thanks for watching!