

IDEAS IN CONTEXT

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STRATEGIES  
FOR COLLEGE  
READING

HARRIET JOHNSON

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## STRATEGIES FOR COLLEGE READING

HARRIET JOHNSON ;

*Hunter College*

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## Preface

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The purpose of this advanced college reading textbook is twofold. It provides a core of readings basic to academic studies because of the importance of the ideas and the significance of the authors, and it guides students in their thinking about and comprehension of these select readings. A secondary purpose of this text is to encourage students to express their own opinions through the process of interacting critically with the printed word and with provocative ideas.

To these ends, *Ideas in Context* has an Introduction and seven thematic units; each unit is comprised of four readings, each followed by four sections of comprehension and writing exercises.

The Introduction motivates students to read effectively in college. It provides definitions, explanations, diagnostic methods, and strategies. It is an understandable guide to which students can refer as they move on to the challenging readings.

The seven thematic units cover most divisions in college study: political science, philosophy, economics and the social order, psychology, science, religion, and the arts. Each of the twenty-eight readings is essential for a background in general education. Each reading is preceded by a prereading exercise in which students are given key words from the selection and asked to respond to them in an attempt to elicit prior knowledge about the subject. This exercise is followed by a brief explanatory comment about the author's life. Next is the reading selection itself. After the students read the selection they complete the comprehension exercises. The Critical Reading questions concentrate on a few skill areas: identifying main ideas, recognizing important details, making inferences, and determining vocabulary in context. The Author's Point of View section focuses the students' attention on the author's point of view based upon the factual evidence in the reading. The Clarifying Terms and Ideas questions encourage students to write

about the selection, primarily through summarizing and paraphrasing. Extending Understanding presents even more thought-provoking and challenging tasks, often asking students to apply concepts from the selection to modern situations or problems. These problems can be used as short answer or longer essay assignments, or they can serve as the basis for class or small group discussion.

Because the readings need to be viewed in a historical context and ideas need to be explicated, the active engagement of the instructor is essential. The assignments accompanying the readings might best be tackled after discussion. Critical Reading questions can be completed individually and then discussed as a group; the same is true for the Author's Point of View questions. The Clarifying Terms and Ideas and Extending Understanding exercises can be done individually, in pairs, or in groups.

The Instructor's Manual provides answers to all of the comprehension questions. In addition, the Instructor's Manual contains readability levels for each selection.

The method in *Ideas in Context* acknowledges the importance of the skills approach to the improvement of reading comprehension. However, the emphasis in this text is primarily on the content of the readings, assuming that college students need some familiarity with the authors and concepts that form the basis of academic study. The method used in this text assumes that reading comprehension is facilitated through important, challenging selections.

The exercises in this text can be a springboard for you, the instructor. Your approaches and experience will probably suggest numerous other strategies. While writing, this was my book. Now it belongs to you and to your students.

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# Introduction

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## *The Purpose of Ideas in Context*

The purpose of this college reading textbook is twofold. It introduces students to a core of readings that are basic to academic studies, and it helps students comprehend the significant ideas represented in these readings. This text implements an important function of a college education: to acquaint students with history and with the great ideas of the past. Through understanding great ideas, students can evaluate the present and apply what they have learned to the future.

When students first enter college, general survey courses are required and the reading is predominantly from a survey textbook. When students move on to more specialized courses, the reading changes; journal articles and primary sources are often assigned. Primary sources are the original writings of the specialists or most influential figures in a given field. For example, instead of using a philosophy survey text, an instructor might assign the reading of specific philosophical writings by Plato and Aristotle. Instead of reading a history survey text, students might be asked to read the writings of those who have influenced history like Machiavelli or Marx. In all courses the materials read in survey texts, journal articles, and primary sources must be synthesized into term papers and recalled for examinations.

The readings in this book do not come from textbooks or academic journals; nor are they simply about significant ideas from the past. They are the original writings of original thinkers. For the most part, the selections were written a long time ago, often not in English; many have been translated from Greek, German, French, Hebrew, or Italian.

Why should you read these authors in a college reading course? One reason is so that you can become familiar with the significant ideas and figures upon which academic studies are based. A greater benefit is that

these readings are both interesting and challenging. Did you ever wonder where so many of the ideas we take for granted today came from? How did our government evolve? Were we the first people to think of democracy? Or has democracy in some form or other existed at other times and in other places? Has democracy been an ideal that others attempted to achieve? Why are we so opposed to communism? What is the basis for this opposition? Is there something in communism that is fundamentally opposed to our philosophy and system of government? Consider the areas of art and literature. How did they develop? Do even the most modern and seemingly unstructured art forms actually follow rules and traditions laid down a long time ago? While this text certainly does not offer a course in the foundations of Western civilization, it does offer you readings filled with intellectual content and challenge from the worlds of politics, philosophy, economics, sociology, psychology, science, religion, and the arts.

Finally, combined with these readings you will find exercises and questions to help you improve your reading comprehension. The purpose of the questions is to make you think about the meaning of what you read. You will be challenged to write about what you have read by pulling together the authors' major points and by reacting to what you have read. Being able to analyze and interpret what you read is an important reading and study skill, not just for your college years but for your lifetime.

## *Diagnosis of Your Reading and Study Habits*

Improving your comprehension techniques depends to a large extent on your active involvement in the reading process; therefore, you must become aware of how you read and study and how you feel about reading.

The following questions are designed to help you judge your reading comprehension, your attitudes toward reading and studying, and your study habits. Try to answer these questions as honestly as you can.

### *Comprehension and Attitudes*

1. Do you like to read?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

2. What percent of your reading do you usually understand?

25% \_\_\_\_\_ 50% \_\_\_\_\_ 75% \_\_\_\_\_ 100% \_\_\_\_\_

3. Why do you read? Check as many as apply:

To get information \_\_\_\_\_ To complete assignments \_\_\_\_\_ To  
pass exams \_\_\_\_\_ To relax \_\_\_\_\_ To get my mind off my prob-  
lems \_\_\_\_\_ Some other reason \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you read something every day?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

5. How often do you read each of the following? (daily, weekly, monthly)

Newspaper \_\_\_\_\_ Magazine \_\_\_\_\_ Textbook \_\_\_\_\_  
Fiction book \_\_\_\_\_ Nonfiction book \_\_\_\_\_ Material for  
work \_\_\_\_\_ Material for college \_\_\_\_\_ Other material \_\_\_\_\_

6. Is reading important in your life?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If the answer is yes, why is it important?

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7. When you are unable to fully understand what the author is saying, which of the following interfere with your comprehension:

Difficult vocabulary \_\_\_\_\_ Way of writing is too complicated  
\_\_\_\_\_ Content is too difficult \_\_\_\_\_ You don't know enough  
about the subject to understand what is being said \_\_\_\_\_ Author  
hasn't given you enough information \_\_\_\_\_ You don't know why  
you are reading \_\_\_\_\_

8. What do you do when you don't understand something that you are reading?

Read it again \_\_\_\_\_ Look up vocabulary you don't know  
\_\_\_\_\_ Try to paraphrase (put difficult material into your own  
words) \_\_\_\_\_ Outline the material \_\_\_\_\_ Summarize material  
(put the main points and supporting evidence into your own  
words) \_\_\_\_\_ Put it down and go back to it another time  
\_\_\_\_\_ Stick with it until you understand \_\_\_\_\_ Ask the instruc-  
tor to clarify it at the next class \_\_\_\_\_ Become frus-  
trated \_\_\_\_\_ Give up and close the book \_\_\_\_\_

9. When you don't understand something you have read, whose fault do you think it is?

Yours \_\_\_\_\_ Instructor's \_\_\_\_\_ Author's \_\_\_\_\_ Text  
itself \_\_\_\_\_

### *Study Habits*

10. Which of the following do you do when you read?

Underline \_\_\_\_\_ Write notes in the margin \_\_\_\_\_ Write defini-  
tions of difficult vocabulary words \_\_\_\_\_ Write notes on a separate

piece of paper or in a notebook \_\_\_\_\_ Try to remember important points \_\_\_\_\_ Stop every once in a while and think about what you have read \_\_\_\_\_ None of these \_\_\_\_\_

11. When you read a textbook, do you do any of the following?

Write down everything you read \_\_\_\_\_ Write out notes based on the most important points \_\_\_\_\_ Write notes that don't seem useful \_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you keep your notes for each subject in a separate file?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

13. Where do you study? Check each of the following that you use regularly:

Home \_\_\_\_\_ Library \_\_\_\_\_ Going to and from school \_\_\_\_\_ Work \_\_\_\_\_

14. Do you set aside a time each day for studying?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

15. When you read, how long do you spend at one time?

10 minutes \_\_\_\_\_ 25 minutes \_\_\_\_\_ 45 minutes \_\_\_\_\_ 60 minutes \_\_\_\_\_ Longer \_\_\_\_\_

16. Do you always leave everything for the last minute (for example, writing papers, reading assignments, studying for exams)?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you consider yourself a procrastinator (someone who never does something today if he can leave it for tomorrow)?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

18. Do you keep a schedule or appointment book to write down dates to remember, appointments, and assignments?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

19. Do you prefer to study by yourself or with other people?

Alone \_\_\_\_\_ With others \_\_\_\_\_

20. Do you ever discuss your reading with anyone else?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

### *Analyzing Your Answers*

This may be the first time that you have actually thought about the relationship between your reading comprehension, reading attitudes, and study habits.

What do these questions and your answers reveal about you? From your answers to questions 1 through 9, you may find a certain pattern. You may see a relationship between whether or not you like to read and how often you read; whether or not you consider it important to read and how much you understand of what you read. Your purpose for reading may also influence your attitude and your comprehension.

If you find that you have negative attitudes toward reading, think about their causes, and decide whether or not you want to change these attitudes. Remember, reading plays an important part in your life, certainly while you are in college and most likely afterward. A positive attitude toward reading can be a great asset, especially since you spend so much time at this activity.

What you do when you read and how you respond when you don't understand something are indications of how involved you are with the printed word; these are also areas that respond to change. If you change your behavior, your attitude toward reading may also change. For example, if you presently do not establish a purpose for your reading, do not read with a pencil in hand, or write notes in the margin, or underline important points or words you intend to look up later, you may not feel involved with reading. Once you begin to interact with the written word by reading with purpose, underlining and writing in the margins, or taking notes on a separate piece of paper or in a notebook, you may find yourself reading for longer periods of time because you are able to concentrate and focus more fully. You will probably think about what you are reading in a different way, reacting to an author's ideas and evidence to see if you agree or disagree with his or her point of view. And when you don't understand something, it may become important to you to discuss it with classmates or an instructor, rather than skipping over seemingly difficult sections or closing the book in angry frustration.

There are other study habits that are equally important. For example, it helps to create your own space in which to study, to keep an assignment or appointment schedule, to keep your notes and papers for each subject together, and to have regular times for studying. These habits give you a sense of structure and control over your life and your time.

Some students think that they have to do everything on their own to be independent learners. On the contrary, studying with other people at least some of the time gives students a chance to pull their ideas together and try them out on someone else, to defend their point of view, and to see whether or not they understand what they have studied.

Come back to this questionnaire when you have finished this book and/or this course, and see if anything about your reading comprehension, attitudes, and habits has changed.

## *Strategies for Improving Comprehension*

Usually, people who want to understand more of what they read are certain that if they could only increase their speed and improve their vocabulary, everything would be much better. To some extent, this is correct.

However, reading faster is not just a matter of moving your eyes across the line at a faster speed (or rate); the more interested you are in what you read, the better you can concentrate your full attention on what you read. Also, the more you know about what you are reading, the faster you will read.

Increasing vocabulary is not just a matter of learning long lists of words and their definitions; it really means understanding the meanings of important words in the situation (or context) in which they are used.

This section does not present lengthy rules and techniques for improving reading comprehension. Rather, four general suggestions are offered that may prove helpful to you: (1) *read a lot*; (2) *focus on what you read*; (3) *develop flexible reading styles*; (4) *set time limits and goals*.

### *Read a Lot*

Reading a lot means reading every chance you get. If you have to make a choice between using your time to read the newspaper or watch the news on television, use at least some of the time to read the newspaper. Find magazines about subjects that interest you. When you have the time, read books that you think you would enjoy, which say something to you. Try to approach your textbooks, in fact all college reading, with a positive attitude.

It may surprise you to learn that in many parts of the world today, access to the printed word is limited. There may be few newspapers, few if any magazines, and a very limited number of books. In some countries it is politically dangerous to want to read books. Going to a library to research information may not be allowed. Think about it.

### *Focus on What You Read*

In order to focus on what you are reading, it is best to observe the following points.

1. *Read with a purpose.* Before you begin, ask yourself why you are reading. Continue to ask yourself that question. It will help you focus on certain parts of your reading as more important than others.
2. *Identify important vocabulary.* It isn't always necessary to understand the meaning of every word; if you are a perfectionist, you may want to do so. But, it is important to identify key words in a selection and to make sure that you know the meaning of those words according to how the author uses them.
3. *Identify main points.* In order to identify main ideas ask these questions: What is the author trying to say? What are the important points that

the author is trying to make? If you can identify these, many of the pieces fall into place.

4. *Identify the significant facts.* These are always directly stated. You have to look for them. It helps to know the main idea and then to ask yourself: How does the author support the main idea? What evidence is given? Or, if the main point is unclear or not directly stated, you can put the facts together and see what main point they add up to.
5. *Draw inferences.* Think about the author's underlying assumptions. Think about the conclusions you can draw from what is written but not stated in the selection; analyze and interpret what the author is saying.
6. *Paraphrase your reading.* If you have trouble understanding a sentence or a paragraph, try to translate what is written into your own words as accurately as you can.
7. *Summarize what you have read.* Stop every once in a while and think about what you have just read. Try to put into your own words the author's main points, the most important evidence, and conclusions. When you finish reading a selection, write a brief summary of what you have just read.
8. *Write about what you have read.* This writing may be a summary. It may go beyond the summary to include your reactions to what you have read, interpreting and analyzing the author's ideas, reacting to the author's style of writing. Or, you may put down in writing points you do not understand as well as points with which you disagree.

### *Develop Flexible Reading Styles*

Developing flexible reading styles means adjusting your rate or speed of reading according to the type of material and the purpose for which you are reading.

You don't need to approach every piece of writing in the same manner. For example, think about how you eat. You may gobble down a hamburger at McDonald's when you are in a hurry to get to some other place. But when you are in an elegant restaurant that serves fine food and wine, you will want to savor each taste and spend time enjoying the food. Eating fast in the latter situation is totally inappropriate. The same is true of reading.

There are many different types of reading, including academic or instructional, business, and recreational. To a large extent, the way you read depends upon the type of reading you are doing. When you read material for work, your main goal may be accuracy; when you read for college study, it is probably comprehension. At other times you may want to read quickly, skimming the newspaper to find an article of interest, scanning a directory for that exact piece of information you need.

If you ask yourself why you are reading something before you begin, you can then decide how you will approach it. If it is the first time you are



reading an important assignment for which you need careful notes, you will probably read slowly. But, if you are glancing through a newspaper to find the time of a movie, then you want to locate the information as quickly as possible without carefully reading everything that comes before and after the time of the movie.

### *Set Time Limits and Goals*

And finally, it is important to set time limits and goals for your reading. It is well known in the business world that if people are given two hours to complete a job, the work assigned stretches to fill those two hours even though the same work could have been accomplished in less or more time.

Set realistic time limits. Too often students decide that they should study for an eight-hour stretch. Then they are disappointed to discover that they haven't used the time efficiently. It is probably better to set aside shorter periods of time on a regular daily basis, using those long, marathon study sessions at crucial times during the semester. It is a good feeling to set an hour's time limit on an assignment and find that you finish the work. Reward yourself at that point, even if it is only to say to yourself, "Great!"

Setting time limits does not mean speed reading. In fact, speed reading is not a skill that should be practiced in this textbook. Although the kinds of selections in this book cannot be understood with a fast reading, your reading speed will increase as your comprehension improves. As you achieve better understanding of the printed word through using this book, you will become a faster reader and a better reader as well.

Of course, your time limits, not your speed limits, should be related to your goals for reading. Try to make these decisions before you begin, changing them as necessary as you go along.

Goals are based on your reasons for reading and what you want to accomplish. It isn't always enough to define a goal in terms such as to study and pass a test or to write a paper. Would you be satisfied with a "C" on the test or paper, or do you want an "A"? You would allocate a different amount of time and prepare in greater depth if your goal is an "A" rather than a "C."

## *How to Use This Text*

We have discussed what college reading is, how you can diagnose your reading comprehension, attitudes, and habits, and a few key strategies for improving comprehension. Now we will analyze the content of this text. In addition to this introductory section, there are seven thematic units. Each unit contains four readings followed by four sections of reading and writing exercises.

The readings are taken from longer works by writers who are considered important thinkers. The writers represent most but not all of the