

THE
MERCURY
READER

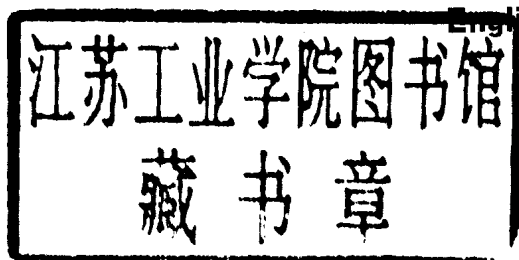


A C U S T O M P U B L I C A T I O N

THE **MERCURY READER**

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THE READING AND WRITING PROCESS

Perhaps it seems odd to write to a student about reading since you have been reading and writing most of your life and are no doubt quite an expert at it. Most of us are more confident about our reading skills than we are about our writing skills, though reading and writing are certainly connected. All our instincts tell us that the two activities come from the same skills, but those instincts may not tell us the whole story. Writing involves creating or composing meaning (although the section on writing that follows will complicate even this definition a bit), but reading can be even more complex than writing. Reading can mean different kinds of activities depending on how we define the word. For example, think of what we mean when we say that we “read” someone’s meaning. We mean that we interpret what the person “really” means, sometimes even when he or she has meant something quite different from what apparently was said. This kind of reading, reading between the lines so to speak, is often what good reading of written texts demands as well. An essay or story can mean something quite different from what it first appears to mean, and it can mean different things to different readers at different times.

The Reading Process

Reading involves perceptual responses that work quite differently from those we use when we write. Readers *select* what they notice in order to be able to read at all. When we read, we notice certain information and ignore other information. So when you read a particular piece of writing, you do not notice everything. Instead, you notice what matters to you. You relate what you are reading to what you already know, and you make associations and connections to your own life as you read.

Reading should be an active process, a process like that described by Great Books advocate Mortimer Adler. In his essay “How to Mark a Book,” he explains that good readers write in books, or at least they

write on a note pad near the book. The notes that Adler refers to are indications of those associations and connections you make with the material, what you agree with and what you do not, what you are learning and what you already know. This essay is an argument to readers *to own* what they read—to consume it as they would a steak and to make it a part of themselves.

Take, for example, a brief essay by Judy Brady, “Why I Want a Wife,” in which she humorously lists all the many reasons she would find having a wife useful to her in her life (this essay can be found at the end of this introduction). While reading this essay actively, you might circle a point that you want to come back to review later, or you might argue with her assumptions about gender roles. In whatever way you mark this text, your markings will be your own and will indicate how you have connected to the essay.

Even when reading and responding to a text, you make decisions about it at an unconscious level. In every part of life, we unknowingly block out much of the information that comes at us simply because we cannot possibly take it all in. Children who have been blind from birth are overwhelmed if they regain their sight, because they cannot select from the mass of information that comes at them from all sides. They have not developed an unconscious ability to select what to notice and in what order. Reading is like this, and part of learning to read college work involves learning how to manage the reading demands of college courses. At first, college reading can feel to a student the way the world must feel to a newly-sighted person. What should you notice first? How can you take it all in and make sense of it? That is where active reading such as Adler’s can come in handy. You can control how and what you notice in any essay or book by responding actively in writing *to* that text. By doing this, you begin to control your ability to select what you will think and feel about the vast quantity of material you are asked to read.

Prereading

As a beginning reader, you learned over time to block incoming signals in many quite subtle ways. As you scan the page of a newspaper looking for a sports score or a weather report, all the rest of the information on the page disappears from your notice. Actually, this kind of reading used to be called “speed reading,” but in 1949,

reading specialist Louise Rosenblatt named it “*effereant reading*,” from the Latin word *effereant*, to carry away. She meant that when reading for information, we scan the text quickly to catch the information needed for a specific purpose. Study skills courses often suggest that students *preview* a text before reading it. The purpose of this preview is to scan for the gist of the information, its basic outline, the main points, and anything the writer has highlighted as important information that a reader will want to carry away from the reading. This kind of previewing can help you to read and remember the important concepts in a text. These concepts can in turn help you to fit subordinate points into the overall order of the reading. Finding what you want to “carry away” is the key to rapid and efficient reading. Just the opposite will occur when you are distracted and unable to select effectively.

Vocabulary and Concepts

We need to feel in control of the meaning of a book or essay that we are reading. Too many unfamiliar concepts or words can distract us from our response to a text. A pattern of unfamiliar words will confuse or discourage us. Each text has its optimal mix of known and unknown words and concepts for any particular reader. We tend to be most attracted to a book or essay that contains just the right mix of old and new information for our own personal store of knowledge. For example, if you have an amateur interest in science but are not an expert in paleontology, a science writer such as Stephen Jay Gould might provide an interesting and stimulating reading experience, especially if you have a fairly extensive science vocabulary. If you don’t, however, a reading such as this can at first appear quite complex and challenging. Any reader should understand that the tools (appropriate vocabulary, concepts, and interest) he or she brings to a reading will strongly affect his or her efficiency and enjoyment of that reading.

Authority

Another aspect of reading selectivity concerns the authority that the reader gives to the text. If you know, for instance, that Stephen Jay Gould is not only an expert in paleontology, biology, and the history of science, but also a talented science writer, and you are reading his essay “Evolution as Fact and Theory,” you can more easily overlook a lack of clarity in certain passages, or even distracting misprints (if they are there), because of your underlying trust in the author and his authority on his subject. What minor problems you do encounter can be overlooked, not only because of the enjoyment you experience reading his essay, but because you give the author the benefit of the doubt because of his considerable knowledge.

Purpose and Freedom of Choice

To understand how the reading process works best, we should think about what happens when we read. First, we have to consider *why we are reading*. What is the purpose of the task? Our purpose determines almost everything else that happens when we read. As we mentioned earlier, Louise Rosenblatt divides reading into two major types: reading for pleasure and reading for information. Pleasure reading usually occurs when we choose a Web site, book, newspaper, or magazine and read whatever strikes our fancy. We feel comfortable and easy, or if we do not, we move on to something else we do like to read. Reading for information can also be comfortable and easy. For example, most of us enjoy finding out about sports stars or gleaning health information from the newspaper.

On the other hand, if we have been assigned by a teacher to read a book or essay, the process can differ considerably from what happens at the kitchen table over coffee and a newspaper, or at our desk as we surf the Web. When *we choose* the reading material, even that with detailed technical information that is demanding to read, we still tend to enjoy the experience. When we stop enjoying it, we simply stop reading. If a reading is assigned, however, and we have no choice but to get through it, reading becomes a different kind of task, especially if we do not find the topic already intrinsically interesting. When someone else tells us what to read, we may have to *find* ways to enjoy reading!



Much of academic reading is assigned reading. With this type of reading, it may become necessary to look for personal motivators for reading, since we sometimes do not concentrate well when someone else directs our concentration. It is not much use just saying that you need an “A” in a course, because external motivations like grades can wear thin quickly. In effect, you want to persuade yourself that you have your own reasons for reading a class assignment.

Read closely the brief essay, “Why I Want a Wife.” First, and not to be underestimated, it is an “easy read.” On the surface, it is simple to understand and “fits into” what most of us already know and think. In this essay, Brady tells the reader that husbands have it easy, or at least they did before wives began to act like husbands. She also tells us that the person who takes care of a household has a lot to do and earns little appreciation. That, too, is common knowledge in this time and era. The only aspect of the essay that might cause comment or dissonance is its sarcastic and critical tone, which leaves us feeling a bit accused, even if we aren’t anyone’s wife or husband. So though we might find something to disagree with in this very “readable” and comfortable essay, still so much of it is familiar to us that we do feel in control as readers. Thus, responding to Brady’s essay is easy because the text gives us the chance to feel confident and successful when we have completed it.

Suggestions for Learning How to Read Actively

One of the difficulties with college reading may be that many students try to read everything as if they were reading Brady’s familiar and comfortable essay. In fact, readings vary considerably depending on whether we are familiar and comfortable with the text or whether we find the text challenging or beyond our usual scope. Often, college readings can be complex, and by their very nature are likely to contain materials that are unfamiliar. The task of reading then becomes more difficult. Selecting what to read and how to read when we are faced with unfamiliar and complex texts challenges even the most experienced readers. For someone just getting used to college, the task can be daunting. Here are some suggestions for ways to attack the problem.

Read as if you were interested in the subject. As noted earlier, when we read what we like, reading is much more interesting and vital. A natural interest in the subject certainly makes the task easier, but when you do not have a natural interest in the subject, some other way must be found. Take again the example of a science essay by Stephen Jay Gould. You are not interested in science, but the essay has been assigned. The question then becomes how to find a way to “get into” the essay. Surveying the first sentences in the text and getting an idea of the content will help. What is the issue of the essay? Consider what you already know and what you need to know to get involved in the subject matter of the essay. Consider what you could learn from the essay. Think of what there might be to argue with in the essay. Do you agree with it? What might be wrong in the essay? However you decide to approach it, be creative and brave in finding ways to focus your attention and interest on the reading.

Read as if you know what is going on. This suggestion may seem contradictory, since the problem usually is just the opposite: the reader of college texts may be quite perplexed by unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts. Prereading the reading can help here. Skim the headings, noting what makes sense, and speculating on what the whole text will be about. Read over the first sentence in each paragraph (usually the thesis sentence of that paragraph), trying to get the gist of the information or the mood of the writer. Select what is known from what is unknown and move forward by reading the material on the assumption that the text does make sense. When the reading becomes confusing, return to the overview you gleaned from your prereading of the material and decide how the new information fits into the already familiar. Find ways to identify the information in the text with things you already know. If necessary, ask for help so that you have enough familiar information to begin to “own” the work you are reading.

Read as if you had an expert next to you to ask questions about the text. If the reading does not capture your attention, the problem may be simply total incompatibility of interests. If so, an expert could help to explain why the topic is important. Imagine what to ask that expert. The same would be true if the concepts and vocabulary are too

complex. What questions would an expert be able to answer? Where could that expert be found? Would anyone else in class know more? What could the library or the Web offer? The point is to approach the reading *as if* an expert could help with vocabulary and concepts that might distract and diffuse your attention.

Read as if you were as knowledgeable, important, and powerful as the writer. Readers often become discouraged when the text seems frighteningly important. No one likes to admit it, but works in print tend to be believed more readily than the spoken word. We unconsciously think to ourselves, “This person managed to have her work printed in a major journal or magazine. It must be important, so I had better not question it. In fact, if I cannot ‘get it’ on first reading, I must have a problem, not the writer.” Assume, rather, that you can “get” the text, that you may even be able to think critically about it, and that you have the power as a reader to add a new perspective to the text. Although the writer has written with the intention of being read, it is also true that the writer may even be wrong or misguided. If after a close reading the material still is not clear, you might want to suggest to the writer that she or he could write more clearly next time!

Read as if you were going to help the writer revise the text. Reading specialists tend to talk a great deal about *active reading*, a concept that means that the reader has as much authority over the text as the writer. Read with the assumption that you can ask important questions of the writer and that you can even suggest revisions to the writer, both of which could have made the writer’s points more effective or his or her argument stronger. Again, the reader has to be creative and brave. Ask questions like, “How could this essay have been organized more effectively?” “What other points could have made it more interesting?” “What information might be missing that would fill in gaps?” “What other examples could have been given to enrich the reading?” For example, the reader might imagine asking Gould to explain a scientific concept behind an argument or to give more details in an example. An active reader assumes he or she has the right to ask these types of questions when reading.