

Sink or Skim?: Top Ten Tips for Reading in Grad School

Master of Arts in International Studies Program
International Studies Department
University of San Francisco

The reading load for your graduate courses is quite substantial, not only in terms of the number of pages required per week, but also in terms of the complexity of the readings which are assigned.

We understand that this can be intimidating at first, and have put together these tips to help you master your readings (instead of allowing the readings to master you!).

1. **READ STRATEGICALLY, NOT LINEARLY (SCHOLARLY READING IS NOT LEISURE READING):** When you read a book for pleasure, you most often read linearly – starting at the beginning and working your way through the book page by page. This is not necessarily the best strategy for academic reading. Your job is to read strategically – mining the text you are reading for information. You need to dive in, find the information you need, and move on to the next reading. Make use of the tables of contents, introductions and conclusions, and index, if there is one, as well as headers and sub-headers to help guide your strategic reading.

Questions to consider as you read strategically: *What is the author trying to say? What is motivating the explanation of the topic? What does this research contribute to our body of knowledge or the world? What are the main arguments of the piece? How does this relate to other assigned readings?*

2. **TAKE NOTES WHILE YOU READ:** Take notes while you are reading, whether in the margins of the text, in a notebook, or on a computer. This will help you remember those thoughts and details that you identify as important, as well as assist you in comparing and contrasting different readings for the week. It can also be helpful to jot down questions, critiques, or observations you have. This will help you when it comes time for class discussion.
3. **READ WITH A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE:** A critical perspective is helpful for situating what you are reading in a broader context, which is crucial for International Studies. Contrary to how it sounds, being critical does not simply mean being negative or criticizing everything. Rather, critical perspectives question assumptions and values that appear to be implicit in arguments.

Questions to consider when reading critically are: *Who benefits from particular social structures and who is marginalized? What values underlie the work? What experiences and perspectives do these values privilege? How might focusing on different experiences re-frame the conversation?*

4. **READ FOR UNDERSTANDING, NOT MEMORIZATION:** Your job when reading for grad school is not to memorize every detail of the assigned readings. There are no multiple choice exams in graduate school. Details such as names, dates, and data can be looked up at a later time. Rather read for general understanding of what the different authors are trying to say (using the questions outlined above to guide you).

5. **KNOW HOW YOU WORK:** Grad school is a lot of work – there is no doubt about that. In order to keep up with the demands (and keep your sanity), it is important to know how YOU work. Everyone works differently. Some people are morning people, some people are night people, some people like to highlight everything, some people like mind mapping, some people like sticky notes. What is important is that you figure out what works for you and stick to that. Do not compare yourself to your classmates and their working style.
6. **TAKE A BREAK!:** While the amount of reading may seem daunting and you might feel like you need to spend every waking moment tackling your assignments, it is absolutely crucial to take a break every now and again. Stand up, stretch, go for a walk, go out with friends, play with your dog. Whatever it is that relaxes you and gives your mind a break, make sure to take the time! Additionally, no one is at their most brilliant after an all-nighter. Make sure to get some sleep!
7. **WORK WITH YOUR CLASSMATES:** While everyone has to recognize their own work style and do the readings in a way that works best for them (see #5 above), that doesn't mean you should ignore your classmates. Talk to each other about the readings, summarize them for each other, and discuss any questions or problems. One of the most effective ways of thoroughly understanding something is to try and explain it out loud to someone else. You are all in this together!
8. **MANAGE YOUR TIME:** Managing your time wisely is one of the most important skills in graduate school. If you have 300 pages of reading for your three classes in a given week, you know you will not be able to leave it all to the last minute. If you know you have three papers due at the end of the semester, do not plan on writing them all after Thanksgiving. Managing your time so that you leave yourself ample opportunity to do the work and do it well is crucial. Once again, everyone works in different ways, but find what works for you and make it a habit.

One effective way is to work in 45-minute blocks. Beginning on the hour (for example 9 a.m.) work (read, write, etc.) for 45 minutes without interruption – no phone, no internet, no email, no TV. At 9:45, take a 15 minute break to do whatever you want. At 10 a.m., repeat with another 45 minute work block. You will be surprised how productive you can be with 45 minutes of working with no distraction.

9. **CREATE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT:** Create a reading space for yourself that is free of distractions. Have a good chair and a good lamp. Don't read lying down as it interferes with active engagement with the text. Whether your reading space is in your house, the library, or a café, creating the proper environment can have a positive effect on your understanding of the material.
10. **PRIORITIZE:** Sometimes, it is simply not possible to get it all done. While not completing all the readings for class should not become a habit, sometimes it cannot be helped. In those times, prioritization is crucial. Look at the syllabi for your course – what is the topic for the day? Which readings does the professor highlight or which seem to be most pertinent to the topic? Focus your efforts on reading for understanding based on the topic for the week. If you are really behind in a given week, talk to your professor and explain the situation. Ask if there is anything you should focus on for that week. Again, this should not happen frequently, but everyone gets behind sometimes. Don't panic and continue working through the materials with all the tips outlined above.