CHAPTER 2

Reading: Making Meaning

"Read not to contradict nor to believe, but to weigh and consider."

—Francis Bacon

Critical Thinking Focus: Reflecting on reading and making meaning

Writing Focus: Thinking about rhetorical choices and writing in response to reading

Reading Theme: Using your response to reading as a subject for writing

Writing Activity: Evaluating and reflecting on writings

Reading in College, Reading for Life

Let's begin this chapter with a question: What does it mean to read? Not so long ago, to "read" meant to turn the pages of a book, a newspaper, or an owner's manual. Reading was a physical activity that required daylight or a lamp, and texts were physical objects that you carried around in a backpack or briefcase. When you went to the library, it was usually to check out a book that would be returned two weeks later. When you woke up in the morning, you read a newspaper as you drank your coffee. And when you got home from classes, you stayed up late into the night with your textbooks and a dictionary.

Times have changed, though, and so have our reading habits. The physical act of reading—opening a book, turning pages, flipping back and forth, underlining, inserting a bookmark—seems at times to be almost quaint or old-fashioned in the digital age of e-readers and the Internet. Yet reading—the deciphering of, and interacting with, ideas and language—is at the core of a liberal education.

Reading is certainly a critical component of education, but it is also a necessary part of life. It is difficult to imagine making it through the day without reading something: a sign, an email or text, a recipe, instructions, a prescription, the ticker at the bottom of the nightly news—the list goes on and on. But we also read for pleasure, and we read to help satisfy our curiosity about the world in which we live. Reading exercises our mind, encourages our imagination, broadens our horizons and perspectives, and can help us enrich our vocabulary. Avid readers are generally well-spoken—and, more often than not, have strong writing skills.

Although most of us might do most of our "reading" without ever getting near a book, the fundamental skills of deciphering, understanding, and interacting with *the text* are universal and, yes, important. Sergio Troncoso, author of five books including *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories,* is passionate about reading and feels that we are in "the crisis of our times." His blog post "Why Read?" was written in 2012.

Why Read?

by Sergio Troncoso

I believe this is the crisis of our times: we are losing readers, we are forgetting why reading is important as well as pleasurable, and we are becoming accustomed to a culture focused primarily on images. What happened to our long-term attention span? Why are logic and fact-based analysis overshadowed by rhetoric and politics? Why can't we slow down? Why do we believe responding in real time on Twitter and Facebook is 'meaningful involvement' with society or family? Why is reading more important than ever?

Over the past few weeks, I have been reading Edith Wharton's novels at night, and have marveled at the modernity of the protagonists, from Lily Bart to Undine Spragg, and at Wharton's ability to keep the story moving, the characters evolving, and the reader surprised. I like to learn from good novelists, and I am learning from Wharton.

I have timed my reading to finish whenever a Yankee game is on the Yes Network, and if no game is at hand, then at least *Storage Wars* or *American Pickers*. That's it. That's about the only TV I watch, or I feel is worth watching. My kids rarely watch TV, and my wife only watches the news, if that. They do see episodes of *The Office*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report* on their computers, which prompts me to consider whether I should cut cable TV once and for all. But I don't. Not yet. I want to, but I don't.

Since Aaron and Isaac were toddlers, my wife and I read to them. Every night. Thirty minutes for Laura. Thirty minutes for me. This was our religion through their grade school years. Not surprisingly Aaron and Isaac as high-school students are enthusiastic readers for pleasure. After school, they are as likely to guffaw at Stephen Colbert on their MacBooks as they are to read their novels in bed. But this family culture of reading, if you can call it that, took years to foment, took attention and care to implement and nurture, and took active dismissal of what I would call the normal American culture of not reading.

I am often asked how I became a reader, in part because many know that I grew up poor along the Mexican-American border of El Paso, Texas. My parents did not read to me. They could read and did read in Spanish, but most of my reading was in English. My parents did hand me two or three dollars for paperback books I ordered at South Loop School from Scholastic Books every other Friday. But more importantly, they left me alone. They left me alone with my massive collection of paperbacks, and they never disparaged my love of reading. The opportunity to read and the space to read are as important as having your parents read to you. I still remember the lime-green bookshelves my handy father built in my room. These bookshelves housed my treasures. I have never forgotten how he took the time to do what mattered to me.

So I don't know if you are made a reader, or if you are born a reader. What I do know is that reading widely—reading beyond your time and culture, reading different genres, reading in different languages—changes your perspective profoundly. Television becomes a bore, and what is said and done on television is amusing. But it's rarely

Source: http://chicolingo.blogspot.com/2012/05/why-read.html. Used with permission from the author.

important. The crisis of the day or the outrage of the day becomes just more inane shouting to get your attention. On the Internet, online status updates are interesting little notes about your life, but never more than that. It's not really who you are, and well, a serious reader would know that. But you worry about the others. Those who don't read. Those who take television as the truth. Those who sell stocks at the clarion call of another 'crisis,' or buy gold as they anticipate a Mayan apocalypse, or attack an 'other' because 'they' are after us, aren't they?

Yes, I worry about our American culture and how it is shaping us. It's short-term-ism, if you can call it that, its obsession with fluff and images, its endless talk about who stunned in what dress. Are any of us ever going to look like Victoria Secret models? Will any of us ever get a chance to date them?

We are not 'censored' in the traditional way in the United States: writers are not beaten or killed because of their words, and no Ministry of Truth enforces an official version of what can be printed and thought. But in this culture of images, we are censoring ourselves. That may be more insidious and long-lasting. What I mean is that we disparage long-term complexity, and extol superficiality. We ignore reading, and lavish time on images. To read, in my mind, is to consider and to think. To see an image is to react. What happens when we start believing the world and what is important in it are only these reactions and prejudices? What have you become when the most expected of you is simply to press a 'Like' button? What kind of gulag is it when its inhabitants are too stupid to understand they are its prisoners?

Because I live in a different milieu of my own creation, and also because I'm rather humorless unless the joke is really quick and clever and insightful, I'd rather be reading and catch a Yankee game afterwards. For me, that's the perfect night. I can kiss my wife goodnight, and kiss my boys goodnight too (yes, remarkably, they still let me), and know that I am happy to do things the simple way, the slow way. I focus on how I find meaning in my life over the long-term. That is how I work to be free.

Thinking-Writing Activity

WHY DO YOU READ?

Consider what Sergio Troncoso said about the importance of reading and how losing readers is "the crisis of our times." In a paragraph or two, describe your past and current reading habits. For example, did you grow up in an environment that encouraged reading for pleasure? What do you read now, and how often do you read? Have your reading habits changed over time? If so, describe how, and then explain your feelings about whether or not this might be a crisis of our times.

Critical thinkers and thoughtful writers are avid readers. But there is more to it than simply reading. In order to fully absorb and engage with a text, a reader needs to read actively and critically. The following sections will help you hone this necessary skill, and whatever, however, or wherever you plan to communicate in your professional life, these fundamental reading skills will make you a better writer and communicator.

READING ACTIVELY

To read actively is to work at deciphering the many layers of a text. An active reader has a dictionary (online or print) at hand, along with annotating tools, plenty of time, and the will to jot down questions and comments on the printed page (or printout), in a reading journal, or in a word processing document. When you read actively, you give your full concentration and attention to the text. (Passive reading, on the other hand, is usually marked by boredom and daydreaming. If you look up from the page or screen and can't remember what you were just "reading," you weren't really reading at all—you were just looking at words.)

Active reading is also productive reading. You have a sense, as you begin to read, of what you might expect to discover. Active—and critical—reading also implies *re*reading; the following strategies will require you to work through a new text at least twice, becoming familiar with its structure as you delve into its content.

The following strategies for active reading will help to make any reading task—academic, professional, or even leisurely—more productive. They also apply equally to print texts and websites.

REVIEW THE TABLE OF CONTENTS OR CHAPTER OUTLINES

The table of contents and chapter outlines of a book or website provide you with the general structure and organization of a text. By beginning with these elements, you can develop an overall understanding of the reading, the organization of its major ideas, and the way specific details fit into this organization. It's as if you are taking an aerial view of the territory you are going to explore, looking for key landmarks, examining the patterns of connecting roads, and developing a sense of the terrain.

Review the table of contents in this book, taking particular note of the topics that are covered and the way these topics are organized. Now look at where this chapter fits in relation to the overall design of the book. How do the topics of this chapter relate to the other topics in the book?

Thinking-Writing Activity

TAKING A READING INVENTORY

In your journal, respond to any or all of these questions. Your instructor may ask you to share and discuss your responses with other students.

1. Is there anyone in your life to whom you read—a child, an older person, a friend? (Or perhaps you read aloud as part of a religious service or a professional presentation.) In what contexts do you read aloud? How does reading aloud define or contribute to your relationship to your audience?
2. Who taught you to read? Do you remember learning to read? Have you helped anyone else learn to read?
3. What was the last thing you read out of sheer curiosity or pleasure? Were you surprised by your response to that text? Would you recommend it to a friend, or was this purely a "guilty" pleasure?

READ THE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS AND THE CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS OR SUMMARY

After reviewing the table of contents or chapter outlines, review next the opening paragraphs and the closing paragraphs or summary. In academic textbooks, authors generally explain the major goals of the chapter in the introduction and then conclude by reviewing the key topics that have been explored. Reviewing these sections should help you fill in the mental map you are creating of the reading assignment and help you develop a plan for exploring the material.

Other kinds of writing—essays, journalism, blogs—often include a thesis statement in the opening paragraph and summarize the overall argument or problem in the concluding paragraph. Note the topic sentence of each paragraph, which will give you an overall sense of the text's structure and organization.

Review the opening and concluding sections of this chapter. What additional information have you gathered about the chapter?

SCAN THE READING ASSIGNMENT, TAKING PARTICULAR NOTE OF SECTION HEADINGS, ILLUSTRATIONS, AND DIAGRAMS

The next step is to scout the territory by completing a rapid scan of what lies ahead. Move quickly through the material, focusing on the section headings, boxed or shaded areas, illustrations, diagrams, and other defining features. This should help you continue to fill in and elaborate your mental map, noting key points, concepts, definitions, and relationships.

Quickly scan this chapter, noting the features mentioned above. What new information have you gathered as a result of this scouting process?

Thinking-Writing Activity

PREVIEWING A READING ASSIGNMENT

Select a reading assignment from one of your courses, and before beginning to read, apply the previewing strategies that we have been considering:

- Examine the table of contents or chapter outline.
- Read the introductory paragraphs and the concluding paragraphs or summary.
- Scan the reading assignment, taking particular note of section headings, illustrations, and diagrams.

Then write a short paragraph, reporting specifically what each of the three strategies showed you about the assignment.

ANNOTATING

Annotation is one of the most productive techniques that you will use to read actively. It involves writing, or entering, your reactions to a text as you are reading, either with pen or pencil on paper or with your computer's graphic tools to annotate something

that you have downloaded. When annotating, you are talking *with* the text, not allowing it to talk *at* you.

Your annotations will reflect your agreement and disagreement with what you read, your questions, what you see as important ideas, where you see relationships among parts of the texts, and where you see connections with additional ideas. Some methods are

- Underlining and numbering key points
- Circling key words and drawing lines to show relationships—for example, between a main idea and support for it
- Using question marks to indicate parts that you do not understand
- Commenting on the author's ideas or language or writing techniques
- Noting connections with your life or with other texts

Most word processing programs include annotation features such as highlighting, changing a font color, or inserting comments and questions. To annotate an online source, either save the online text in your word processing file or simply print out the page and highlight it on paper. (Many websites for periodicals, newspapers, and journals offer a "printer-friendly" option for articles, which allows you to print only the text, on continuous pages, without having to "click" through each separate page or print out banner advertisements.)

SUMMARIZING

When you summarize a text, you use your own language to briefly and succinctly restate the author's main point. A summary follows the structure and organization of the original text and might directly quote (using quotation marks) particularly interesting or apt words and phrases. When you summarize, you do not comment on or evaluate the text (that comes later); instead, writing the summary is a cognitive tool to ensure that you understand both the content and the structure of the text.

Summarizing is a strategy that is most effective at your second or third reading of a text, after you have annotated the text and looked up any unfamiliar terms or concepts.

Reading Critically

After reading actively in order to understand the content of a text, a thoughtful reader looks at it again, this time to read it critically. As a critical reader, you will analyze the text and evaluate its ideas and methods of presenting them. You will think of other subjects or issues to which the text might be connected.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Asking questions will help you read critically. One set of useful questions is based on the components of writing that you learned in Chapter 1: purpose, audience, subject, and writer. It also helps to look at the context of the writing.

1. What is the *purpose* of the selection, and how is the author trying to achieve it?
2. Who is the intended *audience*, and what assumptions is the writer making about it?
3. What is the *subject* of the selection, and how would you evaluate its cogency and reliability?
4. Who is the *writer*, and what perspective does she bring to the writing selection?
5. What is the larger *context* in which this selection appears? Is the writer responding to a particular event or participating in an ongoing debate?

Some questions often used to generate writing also help with critical reading.

Questions of Interpretation Questions of interpretation probe for relationships among ideas.

Is a *time sequence* given in this text? If so, what is its importance?

Is a *process of growth or development* explained in this text? If so, what is its importance?

What is *compared or contrasted* in this text? What are the purposes of any comparisons?

What is the *context* of the selection, and what contextual components might be significant (for example, the time of its writing, characteristics of that time, the relationship to other works by the same author, whether or not it is a translation)?

Are *causes* discussed in this text? If so, what is suggested about those causes and their effects?

Questions of Analysis Questions of analysis look at parts of a text and the relationship of those parts to the whole, and at the reasoning being presented.

Is this text divided into identifiable *sections?* What are they? Are sections arranged logically?

What *evidence* or *examples* support the ideas presented in the text?

Does the text give *alternatives* to the ideas presented?

Questions of Evaluation Questions of evaluation establish the truth, reliability, and applicability—the value—of the text. They usually address the effectiveness of the writing as well.

What is the *significance* of the ideas in this text?

What is the apparent level of *truth* in this text? What criteria for truth does it meet?

What are the sources of information in this text? Are they *reliable?* Why?

Can the ideas in this text be *applied* to other situations?

What is *effective* about the writing in this text? Clarity? The right tone? Appropriate—or imaginative—word choices? Organization?

Of course, you are not likely to ask all these questions about everything you read, and you will find other questions to ask as well.

USING A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH

Successful readers often approach difficult reading passages with a problem-solving approach.

Step 1: What is the problem? What don't I understand about this passage? Are there terms or concepts that are unfamiliar? Are the logical connections between the concepts confusing? Do some things just not make sense?

Step 2: What are the alternatives? What are some possible meanings of the terms or concepts? What are some potential interpretations of the central meaning of this passage?

Step 3: What is the evaluation of the possible alternatives? What are the "clues" in the passage, and what alternative meanings do they support? What reasons or evidence supports these interpretations?

Step 4: What is the solution? Judging from my evaluation and what I know of this subject, which interpretation is most likely? Why?

Step 5: How well is the solution working? Does my interpretation still make sense as I continue my reading, or do I need to revise my conclusion?

Of course, expert readers go through this process very quickly, much faster than it takes to explain it. Although this approach may seem a little cumbersome at first, the more you use it, the more natural and efficient it will become. Let's begin by applying it to a sample passage. Carefully read the following passage from French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism Is Humanism," and use the problem-solving approach below to determine the correct meanings of the italicized concepts and the overall meaning of the passage.

> *Existentialism*, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that *existence precedes essence*? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees himself as not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, *there is no human nature*, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives existence. *Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.* This is the first principle of existentialism. . . . If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, *man is responsible for what he is*. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as

he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. . . . That is what I mean when I say that man is *condemned to be free.* Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. . . . In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait.

—Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism Is Humanism."

Thinking-Writing Activity

A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH TO READING

Step 1: What parts (if any) of Jean-Paul Sartre's passage do you find confusing?

Step 2: What are some possible definitions of the italicized words, and what are some potential interpretations of this passage?

Existentialism: (a) ______________________________

(b) ______________________________

Free: (a) ______________________________

(b) ______________________________

Overall Meaning: (a) ______________________________

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Overall Meaning: (b) ______________________________

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Step 3: What contextual clues can you use to help you define these concepts and determine the overall meaning? What knowledge of this subject do you have, and how can this knowledge help you understand this passage?

Step 4: Judging from your evaluation in Step 3, which of the possible definitions and interpretations do you think are most likely? Why?

Step 5: How do your conclusions compare with those of the other students in the class? Should you revise your definitions or interpretation?

For additional practice, you may select a challenging passage from a course textbook and apply the preceding problem-solving approach.

Practicing Active and Critical Reading: One Student's Approach

Here is how one student, Joshua Bartlett, used previewing, problem solving, annotating, and summarizing with an essay that his philosophy professor assigned, Sonja Tanner's "On Plato's Cave," to show students how ideas from more than 2,500 years ago can apply to their lives today.

Previewing Because this was an instructor's handout, Joshua's previewing started with a look at the title, the first two paragraphs, and the concluding paragraph. Because this is a short essay, Joshua moved quickly to scanning, reading through, and annotating. He was a bit confused when he read the first paragraph, since the class had not yet begun studying Plato.

Problem Solving Joshua realized that his major *problem* with this text was his lack of knowledge about Plato and Socrates. He decided that his *alternatives* were (1) to look them up in his philosophy textbook or the encyclopedia, or (2) to go on reading. He quickly *evaluated* the alternatives. Consulting his book or the encyclopedia would take some time, and he wanted to finish this assignment before he had to go to work. He knew that he would learn about Plato and Socrates next week in his class. His previewing had shown him that these problem paragraphs would be explained later in the essay. He *solved the problem* by deciding to go on reading. He felt that his solution *worked well* when he was able to summarize the essay.

Annotating Joshua gave Tanner's essay a second and then a third reading, each time using a colored pen to draw his attention to specific points in the text. He underlined important points, placed question marks next to parts he did not understand, and commented on the writer's rhetorical strategies to better help him understand the writer's argument.

Summarizing Joshua's philosophy professor asked the students to prepare a summary of the essay and be ready to share it with the class. She did this so that class discussion would be focused. Joshua took his annotations to class, too, so he was able to participate effectively. Here is his summary:

> "On Plato's Cave" claims that much of what we see, hear, and read may give us inaccurate images and projections of points of view and that we need to try to discover what is really solid, rather than believe what might not be. This essay begins by quoting Plato's description of human beings chained in a cave, seeing only reflections of people, animals, and material items. The essay connects this fantasy situation with our experiences with the media, and even with what parents and teachers tell us. The essay says that Plato tells of a person escaping from the cave and seeing the real world. It says that we, too, can climb out of darkness by understanding how received information and our resulting beliefs need to be examined so that we can have "substantiated knowledge."

On Plato's Cave

by Sonja Tanner

In the seventh book of Plato's dialogue *The Republic,* he offers an image of education in which humans are likened to prisoners in a cave. To understand this fully, we can attempt to render this image.

Source: On Plato's Cave by Sonja Tanner.