

Things to keep in mind when reading academic texts (esp. sociology)

1. Authors sometimes present perspectives that are not their own; in fact, they usually do.

What view, model, approach, perspective, etc. are they arguing for?

What view, model, approach, perspective, etc. are they arguing against?

Usually in an academic paper, the authors like to present opposing views, like to set up a debate. Sometimes they set up a “straw man,” which they then tear down.

2. Terms have specific definitions.

What does the author mean by this?

Example: social capital, social integration, class. These are very specific and sometimes technical terms which don't correspond (usually) to our everyday usage. You need to figure out how this particular author is using the term.

3. We are usually less concerned with specific examples than with the larger point that the author is trying to make.

How does an example fit into the bigger picture?

4. Pay attention to context.

This will help you not to take quotes out of context.

Things to keep in mind when reading academic theory texts (Marx, Weber, Durkheim)

1. Read it more than once.

Most of these texts will be hard to get on the first read. You may want to read it once to get the general idea, not getting caught up in the all the minute details. Then, read it again a second time to really get at each concept.

2. Mark the text and take notes.

I know some of you might not like to write in your books or want to sell them back, but I've found that the best way to really get into a book and get stuff out of it is to write in it. Underline, star, circle. Write comments and questions in the margins. Number the lists (1, 2, 3 ...).

From Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren's *How to Read a Book*:

Why is marking a book indispensable to reading it? First, it keeps you awake—not merely conscious, but wide awake. Second, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks. Third, writing your reactions down helps you to remember the thoughts of the author (49).

You will need to write papers based on these texts and it will be easier if you mark and take notes along the way. In your notes, copy quotations that strike you as important and mark page numbers as you go so that you can refer back to the original easily when paper-writing time arrives.

3. Don't lose sight of the big picture and the big questions.

A lot of these theorists go off on tangents or like to make a lot of minor points along the way. These can often be really great pieces of insight, but don't let this distract you from the bigger arguments they are making.

4. Questions. Concepts. Propositions. (The Carlos Waisman Method)

In every text, ask yourself:

1) What question or questions is the author posing or trying to answer?

2) What are the major concepts?

3) What are the propositions? (causal arguments)