Reading in the Humanities and Social Sciences

How many pages?!?
The quantity and complexity of your course readings may be overwhelming at first. With some practical advice and some practice, it will not be so difficult to complete your weekly list of readings. In fact, our strategies for critical and efficient reading will also help you to better understand and analyse what you read.

Understanding Scholarly Books and Articles
Academics in the humanities and social sciences write articles and books in order to communicate with one another and the larger public about a particular question or problem. They generally introduce what that question is early on in an article or book’s introduction. They then present their unique answer to the question in the form of a thesis or central argument. Throughout the article or book, they provide evidence to prove this thesis. Finally, in the conclusion, they offer some explanation of the larger significance of their findings.

Whenever you read a scholarly book or article, you always want to look for and consider with care these elements:

1. The research topic or problem: What does the author want to know about his or her topic?
2. The thesis: What is the author’s argument?
3. How the author will support that thesis: What kind of evidence will the author provide to support his/her thesis?
4. The larger significance: Why is the argument important to the field? What can it help readers to understand?

Reading as a Process
You likely think of reading as a one-step event: you pick up a book or article and read it. However, experts on reading suggest that a multi-step process can make you a more efficient and critical reader.

Step 1: Preview the source to get a sense of what you learn from it.
Step 2: Read for understanding and analysis
Step 3: Reflect and take notes on the reading

Keep in mind that how you actually accomplish each of these steps will differ depending on what kind of source you are reading.

How to Preview an Article, Book Chapter or Book in the Humanities and Social Sciences
Before you begin to read a book or article, consider how relates to the course. Look to your syllabus to see the week’s topic and consider how the reading will help you to better understand important content or themes.

Next, preview the source itself to determine its main goal and argument. First, for an article or book chapter, read the title, introduction, and conclusion. For a book, read the introduction or preface or foreword, the last chapter or at least the last few pages, and take a look at any summary of
the book’s contents on the back of the book. From this reading, try to identify the topic or question the reading is attempting to address as well as its thesis. You may also want to read the section headings of an article or chapter or flip through the Table of Contents of a book. How will the author develop his or her argument? How will his or her ideas be organized?

Knowing the key ideas or thesis of the reading before you read it in its entirety is useful; when you do read the rest of the text, you do not have to guess where it is going and you can skim over irrelevant sections.

Reading For Understanding and Analysis
After previewing the source, you will be ready to begin reading it in full. You should be reading both to understand what the author is trying to say as well as to analyse and evaluate your response to the source.

Questions to Check Your Understanding
1. How does the author explain the topic or central question/problem the source will focus on?
2. What is the thesis of the source?
3. What are the main ideas/key supporting points? How are they organized? How do they connect to each other? How do they connect to the thesis or learning objectives of the text?
4. Does the source introduce any words or ideas that are new to you?
5. What examples are used to illustrate?

Questions for Analysis & Evaluation
1. Are there specific places in the text where the author does a particularly good job of explaining his/argument or evidence? Are there specific places where you feel the author missed an opportunity to explain his/her ideas?
2. How does the source relate to the lecture or tutorial? How does it fit into the themes of the course?
3. Do you detect any bias within the source?
4. Overall, how well does the author support his/her argument? Are you persuaded?
5. When/where/how can you use these ideas? How or why is it important?

Reflection and Notetaking
Read – Think – Write
Taking notes while you read is time consuming and can even distract you from focusing on the ideas you are reading. Instead, separate the acts of reading and notetaking by reading a few paragraphs or a section of an article or chapter, or a few pages of a book, and then stopping to take notes. Ask yourself, what are the three to five most important points that I just read? Write these points down in your own words.

You may also want to create a reverse outline of the source. To do so, write the thesis at the top of the page. Then create subheadings for each major part of the reading. Finally, you can add in details and supporting examples to show how the author developed each major part of the reading.
For further guidance on how to take good reading notes, take a look at our [Template for Taking Notes on Articles/Books in the Humanities and Social Sciences](#).

After you have read and taken notes on the source, make sure to reflect upon what you have just read. How does it compare to other sources you have read on this topic? How does it relate to lectures or other course materials?