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# Critical Reading

You'll find many ways to read and understand a text, but keeping a journal as you read is one of the best ways of exploring a piece of writing. By integrating reading and writing, you can interact with the work more fully.

1. Begin each new novel, play or poem without predetermined bias. If you decide in advance that all good art uses realistic settings and promotes your personal moral values, you close out the possibility of new experiences. You do not have to, nor should you, enjoy every work of literature that you read, but you should be willing to recognize that the imagination is limitless.
2. Read slowly. This suggestion can't be stressed enough. If you roller-skate through an art museum you won't see the paintings.
3. Read with pen in hand. Underline key phrases, speeches by major figures, or important statements by the narrator. But don't limit yourself. Underline or highlight anything that seems important or striking. Take notes on ideas or questions (don't trust your memory). Write in the margins. Keep a list of the characters and/or major events on the inside of the front cover. Circle words used in special ways or repeated in significant patterns. Look up words that you don't know or words you think you know but seem to have a special weight or usage.
4. Look for those qualities that professional writers look for in real life: conflict, contrast, contradiction, and characterization.
5. Look for rhythm, repetition, and pattern. Successful works of literature incorporate such structural devices in the language, dialogue, plot, characterization, and elsewhere. Pattern is form, and form is the shaping the artist gives to his or her experience. If you can identify the pattern and relate it to the content, you'll be on your way to insight.
6. Ask silent questions of the material as you read. Don't read passively, waiting to be told the "meaning." Most authors will seldom pronounce a moral. Even if they do, a work of literature is always more than its theme. Use the questions devised by reporters: Who, What, When, Where. Why and How may take more study--such questions probe the inner levels of a text.
7. Keep a reading journal. Record your first impressions, explore relationships, ask questions, write down quotations, and copy whole passages that are difficult or aesthetically pleasing.

## The Reading Journal

Christopher Thaiss in *Write to the Limit* (Chicago: Holt, 1991) notes that the word *journal* comes from the French word for day, which is *jour*. The word indicates that a journal is kept daily (68). Thaiss also suggests that journals are kept for many different reasons: to record events, to keep an ongoing public record, to record feelings, to make close observations for scientific purposes and, finally, to explore emotions, memories and images in order to think and learn about any subject (69-76).

Don't feel overwhelmed. Just relax; notice and feel things. Associate ideas with other subjects, objects or feelings. Try the following three steps:

1. First, write what you see in the text at the surface level.
2. Next, write what you feel about what you see.
3. Finally, write down what you think it means or why you think it is important.

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