

Guide to Reading Efficiently for Grad School: Maximizing Speed and Comprehension

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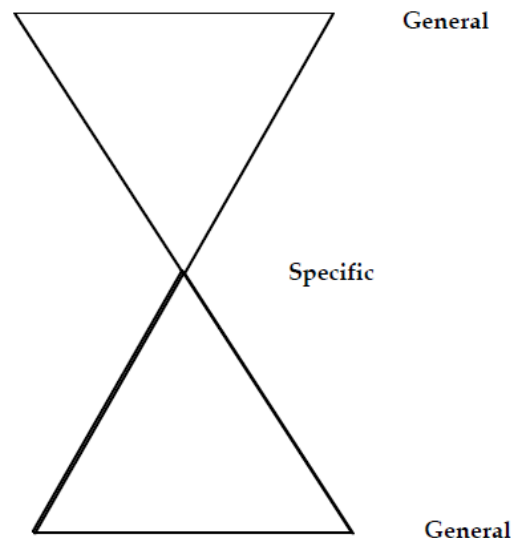
1. Identify the main ideas

- a. **The main ideas are generally broad, not specific.** Distinguish between the central claims being made and the evidence being used to support these claims. The claims themselves are almost always more important to understand and remember than the evidence (the evidence itself may be important, but the claims are almost always *more* important... I'll say more on this below in point 2.d).
- b. **Know where to find main ideas.** Pay particular attention to introductions, conclusions, the first (and sometimes final) paragraphs within (sub)sections, and the first (and sometimes final) sentences of paragraphs. From [How to Read a Book: Strategies for Getting the Most out of Non-Fiction Reading](#) by Paul N. Edwards:

“Non-fiction books very often have an “hourglass” structure that is repeated at several levels of organization. More general (broader) information is presented at the beginnings and ends of:

- the book or article as a whole (abstract, introduction, conclusion)
- each chapter
- each section within a chapter
- each paragraph

More specific (narrow) information (supporting evidence, details, etc.) is presented in the middle:”



The “Hourglass” Information Structure

Figure taken from *How to Read a Book*

- c. **Look at the headings.** Some headings will tell you exactly what argument is being made in that (sub)section, much like a mini-thesis statement. Other headings will identify one or more key concepts but won't tell you what argument is being made about those concepts. And some headings describe almost nothing. Even then, the fact that the author decided to include a heading usually signals a change of topic. Almost every (sub)sections will contain some sort of common theme. Make sure you figure out what that common theme is. If the author thought it was worth devoting a whole (sub)section to that theme, there's a good chance it's important.
 - d. **Look for highlighted words or sentences.** Pay attention if there is underlining, italics, bolding.
 - e. **Look for repeated words, phrases, or ideas.** If an idea or concept is referenced in several different places throughout the writing, it is probably fairly central to what the author is conveying. Figure out what claim they are making about that concept or idea.
 - f. **Notice how much space the author devotes to a topic.** Like repetition, a large (sub)section devoted to a concept or idea often indicates importance. Good writers don't waste a lot of words on something that's relatively unimportant. (Bear in mind, though, that some points are simply more difficult to explain and thus require more space.)
2. Prioritize what you spend the most time on
- a. **Some portions of an article/book should be read more carefully than others.** If I notice a paragraph that seems to be summarizing the central argument of the piece, I often read every word of this paragraph fairly carefully. If I see there is a section on history/background of a program, I may skip this entirely, recognizing that I may need to refer back to it if later references to the program aren't making sense to me. In other sections, I may read the first sentence of each paragraph, occasionally glancing into the main body of a paragraph to see what sorts of evidence are being using to support the claim made in the first sentence.
 - b. **If you already understand the point, consider moving on.** Sometimes a heading makes a simple statement that you already agree with, and you can almost guess exactly what the author is going to say. Or maybe the author spends time explaining a term or concept that you're already familiar with. You probably don't need to read these sections carefully (although you may want to glance over the explanation to make sure some of the phrases/sentences line up with your expectations).
 - c. **If a section is difficult to understand, decide whether it's worth taking the time to understand it.** This is particularly true of dense or very academic-sounding writing. If a difficult passage appears to be describing the core argument, you need to take the time to figure it out. If it's describing some aspect of the author's methodology or seems to be addressing some narrow set of potential critics, you might not need to understand (unless you are studying

methodology or that critical perspective). As W. Caleb McDaniel says in [“How to Read for History”](#):

“you have to pick your battles when you are skimming. Don’t get stuck on difficult parts that are incidental to the larger points of the book or article. Instead, note these passages with a question mark in the margin. If you discover as you read on that these passages were important to the overall work, you can always go back to them. But in many cases you’ll see that what seemed difficult at first becomes clearer as you move along. Or you’ll discover that it was not essential to understand the difficult passage in order to understand the work as a whole.”

- d. **Know something about the evidence offered.** The evidence is not generally as important to understand as the claims (that the evidence supports). But evidence is still important. You should (at the very least) be able to broadly characterize the types of evidence offered by the author. Does the author point to academic studies to support their claims? What kinds of assumptions is the author making? Is there a single example that the author references repeatedly? Do you find the evidence persuasive?
3. Figure out what works for you
 - a. **You can break the rules. Or not.** Some people recommend reading the intro and conclusion before looking at the rest of the article/book. Others suggest quickly skimming the entire article before going through it a second (or even third) time more carefully. I tend to proceed through an article more linearly, returning to an earlier section only if I later realize that I probably missed something important. Don’t be afraid to experiment and see what works for you.
 - b. **Figure out a routine.** Is there a limit to how long you can read productively in one sitting? Are you able to read efficiently when you’re feeling tired? Figure out what sort of setting best facilitates your speed and comprehensive of the material.
 4. Be smart about annotating/notetaking
 - a. **Write down main ideas and some basic description of the evidence.** All of the advice above should help you pick out the most important ideas and evidence; make sure that whatever is most important makes it into your notes. If (sub)section headings are particularly descriptive, you may be able to just copy these down word-for-word (or you might want to abbreviate them).
 - b. **Write down enough to remind you of what was said.** This is another area where you need to figure out what works for you. A short phrase may be sufficient to remind you of an argument. Or you may need to describe the argument more fully.
 - c. **If you highlight everything, you emphasize nothing.** You have to make judgements about what is most important. You should cut out the things that are less important when highlighting or taking notes.