Reading difficult texts: general principles

Introduction

Many students at university feel that they have no problems with reading in general, then come across particular texts that give them special difficulties. Indeed, many of the texts you have to read at university may not be easy to digest. This can occur for a variety of reasons:

- you are new to the discipline, and need more time to absorb its vocabulary and ways of thinking
- the text is highly theoretical and full of complex ideas
- the text may be very densely written; sometimes writers with very important ideas don’t necessarily express those ideas terribly clearly or in a very systematic order
- you may have especial trouble if it is written in, say, eighteenth century English that you are unused to and therefore find hard to follow
- English is not your first language, and your cultural background is different from that of the assumed audience.

Nevertheless, you have to read it, and often, if you are successful reading one text from the historical period or area in a discipline, this will make other texts much more accessible. So, what can you do to help yourself?

Ways to help yourself

Different texts have different demands and different levels of difficulty, so these strategies may not be applicable to all types of reading nor for all of the purposes that you have in reading. Nonetheless, you should find at least some of them helpful.

1. Firstly, before you even begin serious reading, it is necessary to be clear about what purposes you have in using the particular text.

2. The second section then looks at the text itself, asking questions such as: what is the text's purpose? What does it say? Who is or was its intended audience, and what assumptions does it make? This second section is intended to assist you to ask the right kind of questions to gain a close understanding of the text.

3. Finally, the third section describes various strategies you can use in reading a text.

Levels of understanding

Your understanding of concepts, arguments, ways of thinking and reasoning, specialist terms, etc, will grow and develop. Texts may need several readings. Reading the same text in a few days', weeks', months', or years' time, you may understand it in quite a different way. Even if you are aware that your understanding is partial, you should also be aware that you are still making progress.

I Purposes

1. Why is this text included in this course?

The course material – lectures, tutorials, other readings – can be a useful guide as to why you have been asked to read the text and what you might get out of it. Conversely, the fact that you have been asked to read some particular text can be a useful guide to what sort of things you are expected to get out of the course. Ask yourself questions such as:
• What are the major issues that are discussed in this course?
• Is this text a central part of the course, for example a focal text for analysis, or is it more secondary reading?
• Is this text used as an example of a major view, or as a contrasting position? Does it contain ideas that are widely accepted by the discipline, or ideas that are commonly criticised?
• Are there principles or methods of reasoning or argument in this discipline that this text exemplifies or that might help me to understand this text?

2. What is my purpose in reading the text?
You need to sort out the answer to this question to ensure that you get out of the text what you want or need to get out of it. Is it:

• to answer an specific essay question? So, which question, and what does this involve? You will need to analyse all the different parts of the question, and keep the question in mind as you read.
• to answer specific tutorial questions? So keep them in front of you. They will give some guidance as to what are the key things to have in mind as you get into this text. They often highlight the main issues of the set texts.
• To revise for an exam? You can help yourself by having past papers to give you ideas of specific questions and types of task you might be asked to address.
• Background for a general tutorial discussion? General background for your course? If you have these 'general' purposes, it may well be helpful still to ask yourself specific questions to guide you through the text in some kind of structured way.

Crucial: you need to consider how central the text is to your purposes, because an answer to the question of why you are reading it will affect how you read it. For example, a different treatment of the text is required if you are asked to give a close critique of it as a focal aspect of your course, than if it is, say, just another example of a certain type of text out of many, or a text that is used as a way of shedding light on another more central text.

Important: remember that there may be material in the text that is not actually relevant to your purpose.

Think how differently you might look at a text if you were reading it because:

• you were researching the life of a particular person
• you were writing an essay on the roots of liberal feminism
• you were interested in reactions to the French revolution
• you were examining the nature of claims about political rights
• you were producing a critique of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, etc.

You may for example come across the same text in both a History course and a Philosophy course. For each of these different disciplines, you will be required to read it in different ways, as each demands attention to differing aspects of the text.

As a rough indication of the types of differences you may encounter between disciplines, History will be more concerned with questions about the context and circumstances of the time when it was written, whereas Philosophy will be more concerned with the structure of the argument and encouraging you to give a critique of this.

3. Is this a useful text for me to read?
If you have found it yourself in the library, rather than being specifically recommended it by your lecturer or tutor, remember that it may in the end not be very useful for your purposes, or maybe only a small part of it is relevant. Ask the questions in the preceding section 1 to help you decide whether it really is useful for you and how.

II The text
4. What is the purpose/are the purposes of the text?
To understand the text you must have an idea of what the author is trying to do. Here are some possibilities - the purpose of the text may be:

- to give an overview of an area
- to try to achieve certain practical results
- to lay out a broad theory that applies to some phenomenon or other
- to spell out a position without arguing for it
- to argue for a particular position as thoroughly as possible
- to give some reasons for a position
- to argue against a particular position (which itself may not be spelled out explicitly), in whole or in part
- to examine certain difficulties or advantages in a position without necessarily giving a definitive view, etc.

You may need to surmise from what is said or what is left unsaid what the purpose is; you may need to look at the introduction to the book or at the book as a whole; ask whether the work forms part of a series; find out if there is any earlier work of the author which sets the scene for later work; look at some critical commentary on the text; etc.

5. What does the text say?
You will need, as you read (and re-read) a difficult text, to sort out what seem to be the major ideas and the minor ideas. Initially, you can afford to concentrate on the major ideas (although you may not feel very certain that you have really found these). Here are some useful questions you can ask yourself as you go through this process:

- If there is an argument in the text, how is it spelled out?
- Does it come to conclusions?
- Does it have more than one conclusion?
- Does it contain evidence or reasons for its conclusions?
- What kinds of evidence or reasons are given?
- How are ideas in it linked to each other?
- Is the text ambiguous or could the argument of the text be interpreted in different ways? What ways?

NB: Finding the structure of the argument in the text
It is vital to note that the text itself may not provide a clear way into seeing the structure of any argument. Conclusions may come before the evidence, reasons, or premises on which they are based; or after these; or these may all be jumbled throughout the text. This can be a great source of confusion. Taking notes on the text in the order that the ideas are presented may, in these cases, not be the best way to untangle it all. Rather you need to try to work out what ideas assume what other ideas; what ideas seem to be presented as something it is assumed the audience will agree with and what ideas the author seems to be trying to persuade the audience of.

6. Who is the audience of the text?
This can make a big difference to how it is written, what points are focused on, what points are explained clearly and what is assumed. It is important to distinguish between the intended audience for the text as it was written, and the audience of you and your fellow classmates reading the text now for a twenty-first-century Australian degree course. This may be especially relevant to what critical comment you make of the text and to what you can reasonably expect of the text. For example, the text could be:

- a general text, with an intended wide audience
- a text intended for an audience from another historical era, or a different cultural background to yours
• a text aimed at opponents, or sceptics
• a text aimed at sympathisers
• a text aimed at a specific audience, such as the church or some other authority
• a text aimed at an individual such as a letter to X (and ask yourself who is X?).

If you are having trouble getting to grips with a text, remember who the original audience was intended to be, and try to think what the author was trying to say to them, and what they would have made of it all.

7. **What assumptions are made in the text?**

People often run into trouble in understanding texts because they haven’t appreciated the fact that the author has various assumptions – some of which may be idiosyncratic or even downright odd – which guide what it is that is going on in the text. You need to work these out. Some guidelines:

• These may come at the beginning of the text, the middle, or the end.
• These may be made explicitly or implicitly, some spelled out, others not.
• You may need certain knowledge to work these out (eg historical or theoretical background, and so you need to decide what knowledge you might need and how to get it).

It may help to ask yourself: what is this writer’s view of the world, or at least, what are some pertinent aspects of it? Eg, is it a world composed of isolated individuals? Governed by God? Governed by economic laws? By scientific laws? A world of great social injustice? Where progress is impossible? (The list is endless.) You may be able to work the author’s world view out from this text, or from other sources.

Ask yourself: how might these assumptions differ from, or resemble, common assumptions made today or that I might make? Or from assumptions that others in the field might make? An answer may help to clear up some of the problems you have in understanding, as you begin to see the way that the author’s assumptions shape further views that are being presented in the text.

8. **What is the tone of the text?**

This may not be a relevant question for many straightforward texts, but it can be a source of confusion so it is worth considering. Ask yourself:

• Is the writing direct or indirect?
• Are questions genuine or are they rhetorical questions? If the latter, what answer does the author assume? (It may not be easy to work this out; much may depend on what views the author expects his or her audience to share, which may not be your views.)
• Does it employ irony? Could it be a parody?
• Are these the author’s real views?
• Is the author trying to avoid charges of heresy, trying not to sound too radical, etc?

You may need to understand some of the author’s assumptions and have some background information to work some of this out.

**III Reading strategies**

9. **Overview of the text**

Don’t just plunge in to read and feel you must read through word for word until the bitter end. Familiarise yourself with some basics about the text before you begin.

i. **Have you got the best edition?**

• There may be different translations of some texts, and these can vary greatly in how easy they are to read, and
how accurate a picture they give of the original text. You may need to check with your lecturer.

- Many works have several editions and these may vary somewhat in content – it may be important that you have the right one.
- Different editions may contain notes, annotations, introductions, indexes, glossaries, etc, from editors, some of which may be more helpful than others in reading the text. Sometimes even the cover information can provide some way into the text, but it can also be quite misleading.

ii. Acquaint yourself with the work first

- Review the title. Titles to works may sometimes be very complex, and may for instance contain explanatory secondary headings. Particular words in a title may be chosen carefully – for example, to echo the titles of other books or important debates and issues.
- Look also at any chapter or section headings. These will give an initial idea of some of the main topics and important vocabulary of the text. This is worth doing even if you have been given only a part of a book to read; it places that part in a useful context.
- Is there an introduction? There may be an author’s introduction, which can be useful. A translator or editor may have written a foreword to the text which may be helpful in indicating some main themes; but be rather careful here, as some of these may be quite idiosyncratic. Think of this as a very provisional step into the text only.
- Look for other inclusions that may at first sight seem peripheral or irrelevant, as these may actually give you some useful insights into the text. There may be, for example, a useful dedication; a significant poem, or quotation at the start of the whole text or of each chapter; even the acknowledgments may provide useful material that can place the text within a particular context and set of influences.
- Some texts may contain many footnotes, sometimes very substantial ones. Remember that you can’t just skip these because they are footnotes, since they may be very useful. There are some texts where some key arguments and illustrations, or references to other material, occur in the footnotes.
- Are there editor’s notes in the margins, footnotes, or elsewhere in the text? These too may be helpful, but again remember these represent only one person’s views on the text.

iii. Try skimming through a book before you do any intensive reading

- Read the first and last chapters quickly and perhaps the first line of each paragraph. This may give you an indication of the gist of the argument. But be warned. Skimming will only give a very rough guide, and it may not work at all for some texts. It may not work:
  - if the author has a style of writing which doesn’t proceed in this manner
  - for many older texts which may not have the modern conventions of text structure
  - even if it does work to an extent, you may well miss important things.
- So use skimming to get some clues, not a summary of the whole thing

Editions

If your purpose includes a really close examination of this particular text, it may even be useful to you to work from more than one edition.

The title

What exactly does it mean? Think about the exact wording chosen, and note the full title. This can alert you to the critical nature of the work, and also to the fact that it is littered with asides on loosely related topics.

Background material can in this case shed light on the title, remembering that titles may sometimes make oblique or explicit references to other works. To have access to this information you need to have looked around on the library catalogue or a bibliography.
Author's introduction

The work may contain an introduction by the author – this will give something of her/his own view of the work and may be helpful.

Dedication

If there is a dedication – to whom is it directed? Why? Who was he/she? Where can you look to find out briefly who he/she was? What can this dedication tell us about the work?

Chapter headings

The chapter headings also give some idea of the content. A careful look may give you some way into the text.

Skimming

Skimming through texts, either chapter by chapter or skimming first lines of paragraphs, can give you a broad idea of the scope and nature of the work.

10. Reading and re-reading

After the initial overview of the text, be prepared to have to read the text more than once. This is quite normal for many of the texts you have to read at university; remember that there will be many key texts that your lecturers may have read and re-read, perhaps many times. But don't just go over the text again and again mechanically. Re-readings of a text can be thought of as layers of readings, with each layer picking up some different gem (hopefully!) from the text.

There is no set way to go about this, but if each of your re-readings has a specific task, this will help focus and structure your reading. For example, you may initially read fairly quickly, without taking notes, to get the general gist, and then return to specific parts of the text, or the text as a whole, with specific questions in mind generated from your first reading. You may read with an initial view to understanding what some key ideas and terms in the text are, then read later to develop your understanding of, say, how idea A relates in the text to idea B, or what the specific evidence is for idea C.

Levels of importance

In order to do this, you need to try to sort out levels of importance in the text – what are the really key ideas, and what are minor ideas or simply illustrations of the main ideas? Your re-readings will be guided by concentrating on the main ideas (although for specific purposes you may be more interested in what, from other points of view, is a minor idea in the text). Unfortunately, with texts you find especially difficult, one of the frequent sources of problems is finding it hard to tell what are the more important ideas, mistaking a minor aside for a major idea, or missing the main point of the text.

So be prepared to change your views on what is and isn’t important. You can get clues from many of the suggestions in your text, eg: headings; key phrases in the text indicating what the author thinks is important; background knowledge of the text and its author; course material; recurrent themes and vocabulary; the intended audience; and so on.

Consider:
- recurring themes
- format
- function of footnotes.

11. Are there words or phrases I don't understand?

Readers often get stuck with this simple problem. But on the other hand, reading a text with constant reference to a dictionary may be stilted and unhelpful too. It may be a good idea initially to make sure you have an understanding of any new words or terms in the title, chapter titles and any sub-headings, or any terms that you already know to be central from your lectures etc. Then, only stop to look up terms as you go if they seem to be recurring, if you are
certain that a passage is important to you, or if you really think that it is stopping you getting anywhere with the text. Often, you may be better off at least initially making an educated guess about the meanings of words from the context.

Some texts may be difficult to read because the language is old and there are a lot of words not so commonly used now, or words or expressions used in ways that are unusual or slightly different from their present usage. If you start reading a text slowly and carefully with this in mind, you may be able to pick up the author’s style quite quickly. Especially if you are going to have to do a lot of this kind of reading, you may even find that you benefit from – and even enjoy – reading novels from around the period which can help to make reading such material more like second nature.

Remember:

• Look in your textbook, if you have one, which may define key terms in the discipline. Some may have glossaries too.
• Use specialist dictionaries, not general ones.
• Use subject encyclopaedias.
• Use more than one source if it helps.
• The text itself might define terms, although not necessarily at the beginning and not necessarily in a clearly obvious way.
• Particular authors may use words in their own way, just as disciplines as a whole may, and the meaning of words may shift over time.

As your understanding of the text deepens, check out your understanding of particular problem words – does it all really make sense?

Note:

• If there are some very long complex sentences, and digressions onto side issues, just knowing this can provide the reader with some reassurance that at least sometimes, it is the text, not you!
• A simple dictionary can be helpful to remind you of the meanings of words more commonly used at the time but unfamiliar now, and a dictionary on historical principles can be especially helpful.
• Context can be also extremely useful in making an informed guess at what is going on, or checking up on meanings.

12. Can my knowledge of the general subject shed light on what’s going on?

Don’t forget that all texts fit into some kind of context and that this may well assist your understanding of it. Ask:

• Who wrote this text and what do we know about him or her?
• What sorts of questions was this thinker/this period/this school of thought chiefly interested in?
• Is there historical or cultural information I need as a background to this text?
• Is the writer a typical example of a trend/school/period, or an exception in some ways?
• Is this piece of writing a typical example of the author’s work or not?
• What background information can I find from my lectures, tutorials, and textbooks that might help?

But remember, you need to read this text, not just read about it. Do not gather background material and use this as a substitute for reading, but only to assist close reading of the text.

13. Understanding and criticising a text

The processes of reading a text to understand it and of reading a text to criticise it are closely related. You certainly cannot do the latter without having done the former; but things are more complex than simply: first, understand,
then, criticise.

For one thing, as your understanding can grow bit by bit, so your criticisms (whether positive or negative) of the text can grow with it. In fact, formulating assessments of the text can help you to understand it. It can help you test your understanding – does this or that bit really make sense? Has the author really provided sound reasons for his or her conclusions? And so on.

However, there can be stages in grappling with a text where the attempts to understand it and to criticise it get confused, so there are times when you may feel you aren’t making progress. For example, suppose you are reading some classic text by a great thinker, and yet some of it seems to be wrong to you. You may ask yourself then, ‘How can this famous person make a mistake? Why have my lecturers set me something to read that contains errors, muddles, or shoddy thinking?’, and so on. You may feel that you cannot understand what is going on.

Realistically, especially at the start of your studies, if there do seem to be problems with the text, it may not be possible to be confident whether it is because YOU are ‘wrong’, or the author is ‘wrong’ (or perhaps a bit of both). But remember that, in many disciplines, you will be required to read texts which can be subjected to much, reasonable criticism, and that in many cases, even as a first-year student you can begin to build up the ability to provide such criticism. Such texts may still contain invaluable insights, or be vital to understand the work in the discipline that comes later.

So what do you do when you are trying to build up an assessment of the text along with just trying to understand what it says? What do you do if you think it might contain errors, but are not sure if you really understand it enough to know? Here are a few ideas that may help, depending on you, and on the particular text.

A sympathetic reading of the text

Sometimes, although understanding and criticism are related, you may find it helpful in really gaining a thorough grasp of the text, initially to suspend judgment, really to try to get inside the author’s mind and see what he/she was trying to say from his/her point of view. In other words, to make an effort to have some sympathy with the author. Consider the assumptions, the goals, and so on, of the text (of course to do this you need to understand them and this in turn helps your understanding of the text). This can assist with understanding how a text is meant to work for the reader. Only try to build up critical assessment after you have made this effort of sympathetic understanding. After all, this technique often works well in understanding other people, even if in the end you decide you don’t like all the things they do. But note, for some people and for some texts, you may prefer to attempt a critical reading straightaway.

Taking clear notes

When you are reading a text, it may be helpful to make separate notes of what the text seems to be saying, and your (perhaps at this stage tentative) criticisms of it. This may sound obvious, but take your notes so that it is clear to you, now and when you are writing your essay/revising for your exam etc, what it is the author is saying, and what you are saying about the text, eg: use different ink or font, or always put your assessments of the text, and nothing else, inside brackets. This also gets you to think clearly when you are simply noting the article and when you are making some assessment.

What if the text still doesn’t seem to make sense, or seems to be illogical?

If you do seem to find problems, try to think as specifically as possible what kind of problems these are. Any sound academic criticisms will be well-grounded in a thorough, detailed reading of the text. And it is in the detail of a text that you may well find places to make your own valid criticism – of even some great thinker! For example, is it a matter of poor evidence; lack of evidence, inconsistencies; shifts in meaning; lack of clarity; etc? Later on you may come to realise these were due to your misunderstanding, or that they are genuine problems with the text; being specific can only assist with this as you have specific, and hence, more manageable, things to follow up. For instance, you may think initially that a claim has been made without adequate evidence, only to discover later that the author did present the evidence, but obliquely or in a part of the text where you weren’t expecting it.

14. How can I help myself further?
Questions

Essay and tutorial questions set on the text or the general topic may give clues about the important issues that a text deals with. Thinking of these questions as you read can guide your understanding and interpretation.

Tutorials

Make good use of tutorial time. The more you have struggled with a text before a tutorial discussion the more you can test your understanding of it and formulate specific and useful questions about it. Likewise, the more you actively take part in tutorials, the more you can take away with you for when you return to the text. Ask questions – if you have really tried to understand the text, but still have questions, you can be fairly sure that other students will have similar questions and be grateful to you for asking them. If you are worried about being assessed in tutorials remember, asking intelligent questions is a sign of intelligence!

Notes and summaries

Making summaries of the text can help, especially if you really try to make a summary that is more than a paraphrase or a series of quotations. Writing things in your own words as much as possible forces you to see how well you understand it, and in the search for your own expression, you can actually develop your own understanding further.

Putting the text in a wider context

Relating the text to other ideas that you are more familiar with may also be a way of building up your understanding.