

Reading to Write: About Previewing

It is common for students to dive into an academic text and begin reading in a hurry, which is often counterproductive. When reading for academic purposes, it is preferable to read with certain goals in mind. This will enable you to place your focus on the proper elements of the reading and to avoid wasting time on elements which aren't important for your purposes. Your professors and TAs may read with their research goals in mind. As a student, your primary purposes in reading are shaped by the course you're taking and/or the papers you're writing. Spend a few minutes previewing a text before starting to read, in order to orient yourself toward what is important for *you* in this reading. Here is a basic method which can be applied to many texts. Not every question will be relevant for all texts, and you may find additional questions to ask yourself.

- a. Read the **title**—don't skip over it! Titles are chosen to orient the reader and should give a sense of the central concepts in the text.
- b. Think about the **subject matter**: Have you read about this topic before? Where and when? What do you already know about it, or what might you guess? Is it linked in some way to your personal experience? Do you already have opinions about some aspect of this topic?
- c. **Who** wrote this text? What information do you have about this **author**? Does any information about the author appear anywhere on the title page or elsewhere in the text? If the author is an historical figure, what do you already know about him or her?
- d. **Where** was this text originally **published**? What type of publication is this, and where does it fit into this field of study? Who would be the **audience** for this kind of writing? What would the audience expect to find in it?
- e. **When** was this text originally published? What is the **significance** of this time period in this field of study? Is the text historical? Current? Or is it possibly outdated? What were the major events or theoretical trends around the time the text was written or published?
- f. Read the **chapter titles** or the **headings** that break up the chapter or article. What seems to be the general progression of ideas here?
- g. **Why** has your professor assigned this text? Where does it fit into the course as a whole? What kinds of **facts and ideas** are you expected to **retain** from this reading?