

Guide to Reading Social Science: How to work through long reading assignments

Faced with a long list of readings in any social science field, you need to learn to read extensively as well as intensively; it is rarely practical to read everything word for word and line for line as you would a poem, for example. Although close textual reading and interpretation is part of social science tradition, it is often not possible, especially for introductory and intermediate level survey courses. Instead of trying to read every line and word, consider the following suggestions for more efficient and effective course reading.

- I. **Organize reading over the weeks and months.** Look over the material to be covered (syllabus and tables of contents in assigned books). Estimate the amount of reading for the semester and try to divide the work on a weekly basis. Some weeks may have more reading assigned while other weeks less. Although the assignments vary, try to keep your work and pace steady. It will become less burdensome and easier to manage. Make sure to build into your schedule time for written assignments (including 1st, 2nd, and 3rd drafts with time in between for other people's comments, rethinking and revision).
- II. **Begin any reading assignment by reading the abstract, preface, introductions, and conclusions.** These are often the most important parts of any text because the author often signals his or her major themes and arguments. It is necessary, however, to look over, sometimes very carefully and completely, the central portions of the text to identify the evidence provided for the major themes/theses. Often, the topic (first) sentences of paragraphs provide the links in the argument.

Inspectional reading (of a book or article):

- a. Look at the title page and the preface
 - b. Study the table of contents to obtain a sense of a book's structure
 - c. Check the index
 - d. Read the publisher's blurb
 - e. Skim summary statements in the opening & closing paragraphs of main chapters
 - f. Formulate what you think you know about this issue. What do you consider the essential points and key explanatory factors? You may know nothing about the topic; use this ignorance to devise a list of what you need the author to tell you in order to be come informed.
- III. **Mechanics of reading and note taking.** Read the text and make marginal notes (on post-its or separate piece of paper) indicating what seemed like the strongest parts of the text. When you have completed a once through the text, go back and take notes in outline form, by paraphrasing sentences or paragraphs until you have reduced the many pages of text to a few pages. (Make sure to keep an accurate citation to the work so that any future use of these notes and paraphrases can be appropriately cited. You do not want to find yourself engaged in plagiarism.) Do not rely on underlining. Do not rely on highlighting. This is insufficient. In order to "know" a text, you need to convert it into your own words, or your own organization of the text. The text needs to be processed several different ways in your brain. Underlining is passive and does not help you learn the material.

Analytical reading:

- a) Classify the book or article according to kind and subject matter. Into what paradigm or research program (genre) does that work fit? What is the book about as a whole?
- b) Enumerate the major parts in their order and relation, outline these as you have outlined the whole.
- c) Define the specific problem or problems the author has tried to solve. What question does the author claim to address? You might also want to think about how this reading fits into the course. Why did the instructor place the reading at this point in the course? What is the topic on the syllabus? How does this reading provide an answer or information for this topic?
- d) What theoretical statements does the author make? A theoretical statement proposes a relationship. For example, structural theories of deviance suggest that deviance (that which is to be explained) is a consequence of the structure (organization of the parts) of a society. In other words, social structure produces deviance.
- e) What are the concepts and variables used? Become familiar with the author by defining key words. Know the details of the argument. In the example above: what is social structure? What is meant by deviance? Do structural theorists/writers assume the reader knows what is meant by social structure? Do you need to find out what this means in order to understand the reading?
- f) How does the author's argument/position compare with that of others who address the same question or related questions? Where are the points of similarity and difference?
- g) What normative statements (value judgments) does the author make? What values does the author assume readers will share? What assumptions does the author make that may be contestable?
- h) What is the author's methodology? (Here you should be concerned not only with the methods used but the kinds of arguments implied or given about what methods are more or less appropriate.) What constitutes evidence in this reading? Know the author's arguments by finding them in, or making them from, sequences of sentences.
- i) Determine which of the problems the author has solved and which she has not; and of those not solved, decide which the author knows he has failed to solve. If you disagree with the author, on what basis? Is the author uninformed, misinformed, illogical, imprecise, or incomplete? Criticize fairly; do not pass judgment based on personal opinion, taste, or preference. Is the argument internally consistent? Does the evidence (that presented by the author & any other evidence) support the argument?

IV. **Abstract.**

Full Bibliographic citation.

Thesis: 1-2 sentences.

Details: 3-4 well constructed paragraphs.

Themes: 3-4 bullet points defining and using authors key concepts.

V. **Abstract Sample**

William Chambliss, "A sociological analysis of the law of vagrancy" Social Problems, Vol. 12, pp. 67-77, Summer, 1964.

A. Chambliss describes the social conditions under which vagrancy became a crime.

(This is a restatement of the title of the text; it may need to be said but indicates nothing about how, or when, or the conditions under which vagrancy was criminalized. It does not say what the reader understands about the criminalization of vagrancy.)

B. Chambliss describes how vagrancy became a crime in England in the 14th century as a result of other changes in the social structure.

(This is a minimal level of description and suggests, correctly, the major theoretical insight: that law is a product of social structure; however, it still lacks sufficient specificity to illustrate both the reader's understanding of social structure and the relevance of Chambliss' example.)

C. Chambliss describes how changes in the social organization of English society, specifically the decline in labor supply and rise in wages, resulted in the laws against vagrancy.

(This formulation names the specific changes in English social structure but still fails to fully describe the range of phenomenon that led to the law.)

D. Chambliss describes how changes in the social organization of English society following the Black Death, the consequent decline in labor supply and pressure on wages, was opposed by the landed gentry who attempted to limit labor competition by the passage of laws against vagrancy which prohibited travel from one community to another and refusal to work.

(This summary requires more than a skimming of the text, indicates the salient facts and their historical role. But, it does not completely describe Chambliss' argument.

E. Chambliss uses historical sources to illustrate how particular social settings influence the emergence, interpretation, and enforcement of criminal law. In particular, he describes how changes in the social organization of English society following the Black Death, the consequent decline in labor supply and pressure on wages, was opposed by the landed gentry who attempted to limit labor competition by the passage of laws against vagrancy which prohibited travel from one community to another and refusal to work. During the following century, when labor supplies increased and wages fell, the law was regularly ignored and unenforced. However, during a period of expanding trade in the sixteenth century, vagrancy laws were resurrected and redesigned as vehicles for policing and regulating traffic on the public roads where commercial transfer of goods and person had become common.

(This paragraph summarizes Chambliss's general point: law is a product of particular social forces, specifically economic conditions of labor and trade. It also provides the illustrations of the general points. It also names the kinds of data the author uses to make his general argument and specific illustration.)

VII. Outline Sample.

Peter Conrad, "The discovery of hyperkinesis: notes on the medicalization of deviant behavior," Social Problems, October 1975, pp. 12-21.

This paper describes (1) how certain forms of behavior in children have become defined as a medical problem; and (2) how medicine has become a major agent for their social control since the "discovery" (or

invention) of hyperkinesis as a medical/ behavioral disorder. It defines discovery as (1) origin of the diagnosis and treatment and (2) identification of children who exhibit this behavior.

Part I. Why hyperkinesis became popular in the 1960s: provides clinical and social factors that set the context for the "discovery" of hyperkinesis.

Provides medical diagnostic category: minimal brain disorder, hyperactive syndrome, hyperkinetic disorder of childhood and several other terms. Usually refers to extreme motor activity, short attention span, restlessness, fidgetiness, oscillating mood swings, clumsiness. Six times more prevalent in boys than girls. Then explains how this combination of behaviors get identified as a medical syndrome.

a) clinical factors: describes sporadic citations in medical journals from 1930 through 1950s that amphetamines had paradoxical consequences for children who exhibited certain behaviors and learning disorders. Note positive result in 15/30 children. The medical literature was unclear about an organic cause and had various groupings of symptoms. In 1957 Laufer described, named and categorized as hyperkinetic impulse disorder, similar to those with a clear-cut organic cause (still does not name organic cause). In 1966, US Task Force settled on terminology of "minimal brain damage." Since then this has been the main diagnostic label.

In mid 1950s new drug developed Ritalin with qualities of amphetamines without undesirable side effects. In 1961 FDA approved for use with children. Much research on the use of Ritalin, became treatment of choice. Since 1960 more research on hyperkinesis, 3/4 about use of drug, literature citations absent before 1967, by 1970 over 40 per year. By 1975, the most commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorder in children.

b) social factors: Pharmaceutical revolution: identifies role of drug research and increasing acceptability of using drugs therapeutically for social, mental problems. Central to the discovery of hyperkinesis. Much advertising directed at medical profession about the positive consequences of using the drug. Government action: also supported medicalization of these behaviors, proposed that ONLY doctors diagnose and treat children's activity syndromes.

Part II. Ramifications of medicalization of (deviant) behavior:

- a) How deviant behavior became conceptualized as a medical problem?
- b) Why this occurred when it did?
- c) Implications?

- 1) Assume that before discovery of hyperkinesis, behavior seen as disruptive
- 2) Label 'emotionally disturbed' sometimes used, managed in context of family/school
- 3) How became a medical issue:
 - o treatment available long before disorder conceptualized
 - o only in 1950s both treatment and label available
 - o increased interest in child psychiatry and pharmaceutical revolution is favorable ground
 - o agents outside medical profession were significant moral entrepreneurs: pharmaceutical companies and association for children with learning disabilities
- 4) ramifications: treatment simple, results sometimes spectacular
 - o minimizes guilt of parents (removes fault)
 - o allow non-punitive control

- sometimes aids in classroom performance
- children like magic pills
- probably benefit from reduced stigma

Part III: Medicalization of Deviant Behavior

Some history, why has this occurred, asks the same questions again in a larger historical framework.

- (1) much scientific research
- (2) application of pharmaceutical technology related to humanitarian trend in conception and control of deviance, no longer sin, or weakness, is illness disease
- (3) problem of expert control, withdrawal of more and more social life to realm of specialists, non democratic, non participatory, removed from public realm where discussed by ordinary people
- (4) medical control allows something done that would not otherwise (e.g. psychosurgery)
- (5) individualization of collective/social problem (e.g. social conditions that might generate behavior, e.g. stimulus, food supply, lack of physical activity)
- (6) depoliticization of deviant behavior

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