

College Writing R4B
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Read Well (On Screens) and Prosper¹

We know that reading voluminously and well is instrumental in learning, in self-enrichment, in just plain monetary enrichment², in developing empathy³, and also that it can be a source of great pleasure.⁴

As we've discussed, we also know that reading on screens, both online and off, poses particular challenges for the reader who wants to read well and reap those rewards. This requires employing certain techniques that are useful no matter what medium you're using to read, and others that are distinct to digital media. Among the latter is an attitude that reading well is something you *can* do on digital devices if you believe you can and if you work at it.

So, with that in mind, as you read on screens in the future, here are a few reminders and suggestions for...

...How to Develop a Digital Reading Mindset⁵

Vigilantly Reduce Distractions When You Read

This one is, of course, the biggest of challenges when it comes to reading on a digital device, *especially* if you're on a device with a connection to the Internet. If you're on a device and you want to read—*really* read and not just quickly skim something over—then shut off your notifications, and put away any other devices (e.g. your smartphone) that are sure to ping at you and beckon you to pay attention to them. Do this even if you're reading in print. Be mindful of what tends to distract you—both digitally and in the physical environment around you—and work to create the conditions in which you're best able to focus.

¹ Is this an intentional *Star Trek* reference? Yes it is.

² See Merle.

³ Because science says so! For just one example, see Belluck.

⁴ As we've also discussed, school sometimes does a good job of killing this. To make amends, may I recommend you visit reading.berkeley.edu? You'll find great, and *pleasurable*, summer reading recommendations from Berkeley faculty, students, and staff dating back 31 years.

⁵ For a more detailed, and teacher-focused, discussion of the items on this list, see Larkin and Flash (which, as it happens, is also the title of an as yet unproduced cop-buddy movie).

Take Active Steps to Manage Eye Fatigue

This is another biggie for reading on screens, particularly the backlit devices that we tend to use. Generally, your eyes will get tired faster looking at a screen than they will looking at a printed page. (E-ink technologies on e-readers like the Kindle or Kobo seem to be an exception to this.) Build in breaks where you look away from the screen periodically to rest your eyes—this is good practice for using digital devices in general. One possible way of encouraging you to look away from the screen is to...

Take Notes on What You Read (or just Slow Down)

You know this one already. Taking notes helps you to better remember what you read, and it helps you to find your way in a text and to more deeply engage with it. If you figure out how to annotate effectively on the digital text itself, great! Otherwise, you can always sketch notes on paper (which helps with the aforementioned eye fatigue).

Of course, you don't have to, nor can you, take notes on everything you read, but even if you're not taking notes, you can remember that when you're on a digital device, the tendency is often to move too quickly. Think of the way we scroll through documents on digital devices, how quickly we expect things to download, or how fast Google returns its results. This speed is fantastic and efficient and helpful. However, to read effectively—no matter whether you are taking notes or not, and even when you are trying to skim productively—you have to *slow down*. Put in the effort, and the text will yield its riches.

“Reading” Means More Than One Thing: Recognize Your Purpose for Reading

Reading doesn't always have to mean reading deeply. We, all of us, have always skimmed quite a bit and sometimes read less carefully than we should, even in print. The problem with reading on screens is that everything is biased towards being faster and shorter (TL;DR⁶) and more efficient, so that skimming and scrolling is the default mode.

Recognize the purpose for your reading and adjust your practice accordingly. Just need a quick fact or the gist of what something is about or to find that quote you know was somewhere in the text? Then a quick skim or CTRL-F search is what's in order. Need to summarize something, or assess an argument, or analyze a story? Then moving more carefully and following some of the techniques for good critical reading is in order. These include practices like those I've noted above, or others such as re-reading to discover meaning; persisting through a challenging reading by understanding what you can and then pressing forward; or writing about what you read, which brings me to my final recommendation for now:

⁶ Too long, didn't read.

Practice Reflective Writing: Write About What and How You Read

This is related to the earlier practice of writing notes, and it's why (in large part) people like me have been forcing students to write essays for years.⁷ By writing about a text—and having to explain it to the audience for your essay—you come to understand it and the issues it raises more fully. (And to reap those rewards I mentioned back at the start.)

This also applies to the meta-cognitive work of reflecting on *how* you read. What happens when you read in different ways? What works best for you, personally, to be a productive reader? Ideally, you would write about this, as I've required you to do in all those "Notes to Self," but even just thinking about your thinking (thus the "meta" in meta cognition) is a time-honored and research-backed⁸ way to learn and to keep teaching yourself.

Bibliography⁹

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⁷ Sorry. As recompense, please see footnote 4.

⁸ Because science!

⁹ Observant readers of this handout (i.e. all of you) will have noticed that I use "Bibliography" here instead of the "Works Cited" that we use in MLA style. That's because I've used footnotes instead of the MLA's parenthetical citation style and...You know what? I'm going to stop right there, as this footnote is only reinforcing the notion of school as killing of reading pleasure. Now move along, all of you, and read well!

¹⁰ Okay, I didn't technically reference this in anything I've written above, but it's a good blog post—it's well written and makes reference to some interesting suggestions and research from experts in the field, so I provide it for you here.