

Reading Comprehension: Strategies to Support Your Learning

Most everyone has, at some point, encountered challenges with reading comprehension. Maybe you've had one of the following thoughts recently:

“This article doesn't make sense.”

“This jargon is frustrating; I don't know what the author is talking about.”

“I've read every word and am still confused.”

We've all been there, and it's likely that trying out one or more new strategies will help.

Below, you'll find a short list of challenges you might encounter when reading. Each has been paired with one or more helpful strategies to support your reading process. Not all strategies work equally well for all readers, so plan to experiment.

Challenges when Reading	Strategies to Help
Remaining actively engaged with the text (maintaining your focus, monitoring your understanding of what you're reading)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Read out loud.* ✓ Use a screen reader, ask a friend to read to you, or record yourself reading the text and then listen back. ✓ Annotate: pause and write down key words or concepts from each page, section, or even paragraph <p style="text-align: center;"><i>*This strategy can be especially helpful for those paragraphs or passages that are unclear.</i></p>
Finding the main argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Review the sentences or paragraph at the end of the introduction. ✓ Seek out the signal verbs: does the author “argue,” “contend,” “suggest”? ✓ Look for transition sentences that detail the steps or process of the argument: “First, I will detail____. Then, I will show _____. Finally, I will_____.” These steps signal the path of the argument and are typically found right before the thesis/main argument. ✓ If the article has an “abstract,” which is a short summary before the main body of the article, it likely also states the argument. Read the abstract slowly to find some of the clues listed above.
Understanding the overall logic and flow of the article/text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Read the first and last paragraph of the introduction. ✓ Skim through the section headings. ✓ Read the concluding paragraph(s). <p style="text-align: center;"><i>To get a better understanding of the structure of the text, read through the body of the text in this way: read only the topic (i.e., first) and concluding sentences of each paragraph, paragraph by paragraph, all the way through the text.</i></p>

<p>Recalling key ideas, points of support, or difficult concepts from the first read-through</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Highlight keywords in the text. <p style="text-align: center;">AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Write a short note/summary in the margin at the end of each paragraph or passage. (Put the main idea of the paragraph or section into your own words, in any language.)
<p>Locating points of support, evidence, and details (material beyond the introduction)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OR</p> <p>“Getting lost” in the body of a text</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Return to the introduction and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A) See if the author tells you what to anticipate in each section of the paper. What comes next, after the introduction? Can you find and mark those sections to help track your understanding? B) If not, try to track your understanding by dragging your finger or mouse through—paragraph by paragraph—and saying aloud what you know/understand, in any language. This might help you identify the passage where you “got lost.” Carefully re-read that passage and make a short note in the margin to summarize what you understand (and, if relevant, what you don’t).
<p>Understanding details within paragraphs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ If you can, identify the sentence(s) that are giving you trouble. Highlight those and read the sentence <i>before</i> and the sentence <i>after</i> each one. Does this context support your understanding of the sentence? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, make a marginal note about the meaning. • If no, are there key terms that are unclear? Circle these and define each. Re-read the sentences and see if this new vocabulary helps your understanding. Rewrite the sentence in your own words or language. ✓ If you could not identify the challenging sentence or idea, track your finger or mouse through sentence-by-sentence to talk aloud through the meaning of each and locate the sentence(s) that were unclear. Then follow the steps above.
<p>Understanding the text’s main topic or subject</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do a general (Google and/or library) search to look for background information on the topic. <p style="text-align: center;">AND/OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Consider the author’s purpose. (e.g. “The author is trying to persuade me that ____.” “The author is criticizing ____.” “The author is providing information about ____ and ____ in order to ____.” “The author is arguing for ____ or against ____.”)

<p>Distinguishing the author’s argument from different/opposing arguments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Look for “turns” in the text (e.g. “Although some people think/say/believe X, I will argue Y”). ✓ If other people are cited in the text (e.g. “Although McGarry thinks X...”), find those names in the list of citations, and take note of what they wrote. ✓ Make a list or map of the “characters” (authors, critics, experts, or others) that emerge in the “turns,” especially if there are multiple “turns.” Who thinks about this topic? What do they say in comparison to what the author is saying?
<p>Understanding the terms/jargon associated with the topic</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Highlight the unfamiliar terms. Does the context of the sentence help you understand each term? ✓ If no, look up the term and write the definition in the margin. When re-reading, you might even use some of the similar words from the definition that you found in the sentence, replacing the unfamiliar term. <p><i>To further support your reading, consider making a glossary for yourself in a separate document that you can keep open while reading.</i></p> <p><i>To extend your learning, as part of your glossary, write each new word in a sentence of your own. Putting this new language into your own words will help you use it more fluently in the future.</i></p>

One-on-One Reading Support at the Student Success Center

We are here to help! At the Student Success Center, we have reading support specialists on our tutoring staff who can practice these and other strategies with you. Reading support specialists double as writing tutors and/or conversation partners, so we are able to not only help you navigate a difficult text but also help you prepare for the writing project, presentation, or exam that might be connected to this reading assignment. Click on “Meet with a Writing Tutor or Conversation Partner” on our homepage to make your appointment today, or visit our center whenever we are open for a drop-in session.