

# The Art of Close Reading (Part One)

To read well requires one to develop one's thinking about reading and, as a result, to learn how to engage in the process of what we call close reading. Students not only need to learn how to determine whether a text is worth reading, but also how to take ownership of a text's important ideas (when it contains them). This requires the active use of intellectual skills. It requires command of the theory of close reading as well as guided practice based on that theory.

In this and the next few articles we focus on some of the fundamentals of close reading. We explain what it means to think through a text using theory of close reading at the core of the reading process.

## Reading for a Purpose

Skilled readers do not read blindly, but purposely. They have an agenda, goal, or objective. Their purpose, together with the nature of what they are reading, determines how they read. They read in different ways in different situations for different purposes. Of course, reading has a nearly universal purpose: to figure out what an author has to say on a given subject.

When we read, we translate words into meanings. The author has previously translated ideas and experiences into words. We must take those same words and re-translate them into the author's original meaning using our own ideas and experiences as aids. Accurately translating words into intended meanings is an analytic, evaluative, and creative set of acts. Unfortunately, few people are skilled at translation. Few are able to accurately mirror the meaning the author intended. They project their own meanings into a text. They unintentionally distort or violate the original meaning of authors they read. As Horace Mann put it in 1838:

"I have devoted especial pains to learn, with some degree of numerical accuracy, how far the reading, in our schools, is an exercise of the mind in thinking and feeling and how far it is a barren action of the organs of speech upon the atmosphere. My information is derived principally from the written statements of the school committees of the respective towns — gentlemen who are certainly exempt from all temptation to disparage the schools they superintend. The result is that more than 11/12ths of all the children in the reading classes do not understand the meanings of the words they read; and that the ideas and feelings intended by the author to be conveyed to and excited in, the reader's mind, still rest in the author's intention, never having yet reached the place of their destination." (Second Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, 1838)

In general, then, we read to figure out what authors mean. Our reading is further influenced by our purpose for reading and by the nature of the text itself. For example, if we are reading for pure pleasure and personal amusement, it may not matter if we do not fully understand the text. We may simply enjoy the ideas that the text stimulates in

us. This is fine as long as we know that we do not deeply understand the text. Some of the various purposes for reading include:

1. Sheer pleasure: requires no particular skill level
2. To figure out a simple idea: which may require skimming the text
3. To gain specific technical information: skimming skills required
4. To enter, understand, and appreciate a new world-view: requires close reading skills in working through a challenging series of tasks that stretch our minds
5. To learn a new subject: requires close reading skills in internalizing and taking ownership of an organized system of meanings

How you read should be determined in part by what you read. Reflective readers read a textbook, for example, using a different mindset than they use when reading an article in a newspaper. Furthermore, reflective readers read a textbook in biology differently from the way they read a textbook in history.

Having recognized this variability, we should also recognize that there are core reading tools and skills for reading any substantive text, some of which will be the focus of this and our next few our columns.

#### Considering the Author's Purpose

In addition to being clear about our own purpose in reading, we must also be clear about the author's purpose in writing. Both are relevant. Consider the following agendas. Think about what adjustments you would make in your reading given the differing purposes of these writers:

- politicians and their media advisors developing political campaign literature
- newspaper editors deciding which stories their readers would be most interested in and how to tell the story to maintain that interest
- advertisers working with media consultants while writing copy for advertisements (to sell a product or service)
- a chemist writing a laboratory report
- a novelist writing a novel
- a poet writing a poem
- a student writing a research report.

To read productively, your purpose in reading must take into account the author's purpose in writing. For example, if you read a historical novel to learn history, you would

do well to read further in history books and primary sources before you conclude that what you read in the historical novel was accurate. Where fact and imagination are blended to achieve a novelist's purpose, fact and imagination must be separated to achieve the reader's pursuit of historical fact.

### **Developing a “Map” of Knowledge**

All knowledge exists in “systems” of meanings, with interrelated primary ideas, secondary ideas, and peripheral ideas. Imagine a series of circles beginning with a small core circle of primary ideas, surrounded by concentric circles of secondary ideas, moving outward to an outer circle of peripheral ideas. The primary ideas, at the core, explain the secondary and peripheral ideas. Whenever we read to acquire knowledge, we should take ownership, first, of the primary ideas, for they are a key to understanding all of the other ideas. Moreover, when we gain an initial understanding of the primary ideas, we can begin to think within the system as a whole. The sooner we begin to think within a system, the sooner the system becomes meaningful to us.

Thus, when we understand core historical ideas, we can begin to think historically. When we understand core scientific ideas, we can begin to think scientifically. Core or primary ideas are the key to every system of knowledge. They are the key to truly learning any subject. They are the key to retaining what we learn for lifelong use.

We should relate the core ideas we learn within one discipline to core ideas in other systems of knowledge, for knowledge exists not only in a system but also in relation to all other systems of knowledge. To do this, we must learn how to read books for their core ideas and for their system-defining function. Mastering any set of foundational ideas makes it easier to learn other foundational ideas. Learning to think within one system of knowledge helps us learn to think within other systems.

For example, if in studying botany, we learn that all plants have cells, we should connect this idea to the fact that all animals have cells (which we learned in studying biology). We can then begin to consider the similarities and differences between animal and plant cells.

Or consider the relation between psychology and sociology. Psychology focuses principally on individual behavior while sociology focuses on group behavior. But one's individual psychology influences how one relates to group norms, and social groups shape how individuals deal with their perceived life problems and opportunities. By reading for the core ideas in both fields and relating those ideas, we better understand the way in which the psychological and sociological are intertwined in our lives.

### **Reading to Understand Systems of Thought**

Reading with discipline, then, means reading to understand systems of thought. Understanding systems of thought means taking command of the structures that are the basis of all thought. In other words, when we understand the parts of thinking, we then

read for purposes and goals; for questions, problems, and issues; for information and data; for concepts, theories, and ideas; for interpretations and conclusions; for assumptions; for implications and consequences; and for points of view. The ability to read in these disciplined ways gives power and command to your reading. You do not simply read; you construct systems of thought as you read.

## Reading Within Disciplines

To understand academic subjects or disciplines, we must approach them as systems of thought. Indeed, not only are all disciplines system of thought, but often they are systems of systems. Thus, scientific thinking forms a large-scale system of thought (which contrasts with other systems, such as ethical thinking). But science as a large-scale system also contains sub-systems within it (physics, chemistry, biology, physiology, and so forth). Science, therefore, is a system of systems.

But, unlike science, in which there is agreement on the most basic principles guiding scientific thinking, some systems within a given discipline are in conflict with each other. For example, philosophy, psychology, and economics contain multiple conflicting schools of thought.

To be an effective reader within disciplines, you must learn to identify, for any given subject, whether it is best understood as a system of supporting systems (such as math and science) or a system of conflicting systems (such as philosophy, psychology, and economics). If you are within a system-harmonious field, your task is to master the systems and come to see how they support each other. If you are within a system-conflicting field, your task is to master the systems by exploring how they conflict with each other. Of course, in seeing how conflicting systems exclude each other, you would also discover how they overlap. Conflict between systems of thought is rarely, if ever, total and absolute. You will find conflicting systems in all disciplines in which there are competing schools of thought.

## Conclusion

To read well, we must understand reading as requiring intellectual skills. As a good reader, we don't simply decipher words, we actively engage in a dialog with the writer. We actively seek the author's purpose in writing. We look for systems of meaning in a text.

This article was adapted from *How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading*, by Richard Paul and Linda Elder.