An Active Reading Strategy for Complex Arguments

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Over my years of studying, I have found it worthwhile to pay attention to the different ‘working parts’ or ‘notables’ of an essay, chapter or spoken presentation. What I call notables are words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs that play a noteworthy role in a particular reading or lecture. As a study tool, I have developed symbolic representations of each of these ‘working parts’ so that I can flag them noticeably in the margins of the text. This not only makes it easier for me to re-skim the text later on, but it also helps me to pay active attention to the content of the text by helping me to maintain a sense of its overall structure of thought and argument. Many of my students have found these categories useful, even if they have preferred to develop their own particular active reading symbols instead of using mine.

Key Points: This is one of the most common types of notable. You can flag key words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or even pages. It also tends to be the one that I’ve seen other people use symbols for, even if they haven’t established any others. People commonly use stars, and asterisks. I tend to draw a simplified little old-fashioned key shape.

Thesis: Sometimes an author will be kind enough to state his or her main point quite explicitly. Underlining this passage can be helpful, especially if it’s buried in the middle of a long passage.

Argument: Sometimes a writer will clearly make an argumentative point which, while not really the main thesis of the reading, is a strong contention worth noting.

Questions: Whether hypothetical or sincere, whenever an author poses a question, it’s worth paying attention to.

Terms: As mentioned above, it’s crucial to watch out for key terminology. This includes neologisms, word combos, catch-phrases, buzz-words, slogans, metaphors, acronyms.

Definitions: Authors often present their very own definition of a word or term. Sometimes they define a term they have just introduced or invented. Other times they will stipulate a definition for their present purposes. In academia, definitions are rarely considered neutral and objective – they can be (and are) contested and debated. And they often play a role in shaping the conclusions somebody makes.

Words: Reading is a great opportunity to build your vocabulary. Consider underlining or flagging unfamiliar words as you read through, while trying to ‘read around’ them while guessing the context. Then, after you’ve flagged a few, look them up all at once and note the definitions in the margin so that when you re-read you will have a reference. (By the way, keeping a master list of the words you’ve looked up in the past can pay off with huge dividends – especially when you find yourself coming across the same word multiple times.)

Other Opinions (Devil’s Advocate): Sometimes an author will go on for pages expressing somebody else’s opinion. Sometimes they do this with the aim of rebutting them later. Other times they simply want to set the stage for their own work. Either way, if you can identify passages where the author is recapping or representing somebody else’s opinions, you will understand the structure of the argument much better. (You might also be inspired to go and explore that other thinker’s opinions, written elsewhere.)

Rebuttals (Angel’s Advocate): What I call the ‘angel’s advocate’ is typically a follow-up to the presentation of somebody else’s opinion. This is typified by cases where the author presents somebody else’s argument, and then rebuts, counter-argues, or disproves it. Re-skimming will be made much easier if you take the time to flag the place in the text where the author switches from “they say this” to “I say this.”

Not: When you’re skimming, it’s often hard to notice that one little three-letter word that completely changes the point of a sentence or paragraph. If you circle and/or flag it, your skimming will be assisted.

Lists: Consider flagging those places where the author offers a long list. If the list has a specific number of entries, you can indicate at the outset how many entries are about to follow.

Ordinals: Ordinals are numbered ordering-words like ‘first’, ‘second’, ‘third’, and ‘finally’. These words play a gigantic role in structuring people’s writing. If you flag them, you will very quickly be able to skim and notice the big-picture structure of an argument at a glance. Doing this can help psychologically by breaking up longer and more tedious sections into manageable bite-sized portions.

Summary: Flaging ‘summarizing’ or ‘recapitulating’ passages can be very helpful in setting the stage for future re-skimming.

Distinctions: Academic authors love to make distinctions. Sometimes this is the entire point of a paragraph, sentence, or even an entire piece. Pay close attention when authors say that “there is a difference between”, say, apples and oranges, or that “a distinction must be drawn” between them.

Indistinctions: In contrast, sometimes the author will suggest that a common distinction is actually a false dichotomy, or perhaps are two aspects of the same thing. This is worth noting.

Tensions: Sometimes a writer will point out that two specific concepts, goals, values, or ideas are in tension with another, meaning that they seem to impose counteracting demands or pressures. For example, we sometimes say that the value of freedom is in tension with the value of responsibility.

Goals: Sometimes, academic authors will make prescriptions about what should be done, or at least mention what it is that they are trying to do. They will use the language of ‘aims’, ‘goals’, ‘targets’, ‘trying’, ‘attempting’, etc. This is usually noteworthy because it can give you a hint as to the author’s assumptions, agenda, and argument.

Focus: Authors sometimes say explicitly what they think should be focused on, studied, and examined closer. We need to look a little bit more closely at this, they say. Or: If we really want to understand what’s going on, we have to pay closer attention to that.

Reference: An author will sometimes draw on other articles or books that sound interesting and worth checking out. By marking the citation or reference, you can come back to it once you’re done instead of interrupting the flow of your reading.

Quotation: If the author quotes a line or passage from another person’s work, you may want to note it for the future. Quoted text is typically selected precisely because it is very well-phrased, and expresses an idea clearly and helpfully.

Many more could be added to this list. Hopefully some of these active reading symbols will be helpful to you. I encourage you to try them out. Keep the ones that work, and discard those that don’t. Invent new ones where necessary! In the end, the most effective strategies will be the ones that seem natural to you.