

## CHAPTER ONE

# How to Read, Part I

### *Dissecting a Text*

Have you ever had the following experience? You are hunched over a book, reading steadily along. The monotone monologue in your head is encountering a stream of sentences. You are turning pages. You are in a trance, when suddenly, as if shocked by an unseen cattle prod, you are jolted out of your semiconscious state to discover, “My God. I have no idea what I’ve been reading for the past twenty minutes!”

You are not alone. Nearly everyone has been a Book Zombie at some point, probably at many points. This is the result of reading passively, and you must never do it again.

Passive reading is the act of opening a book without direction and attempting to comprehend it by starting at the beginning and reading through to the end. To read with no method, no plan, and no targeted objective makes no sense. We call that “linear” reading, and it cannot help you when you are actually searching for something very specific. It would be like looking for Mr. Zachary Z. Zypster in the New York phone book and saying, “Gee, whiz. This is an awfully big book. I guess I’ll start

reading from the beginning, at Aaron Archibald Ababa, and keep reading until I find Mr. Zypster. He must be in here somewhere.”

I have good news. It turns out that not only do phone books have a way of organizing their information for easy searching, so do scholarly texts. You just need to know how they are structured, so you can find what you need.

I have two goals for this chapter:

1. To save you a great deal of time.
2. To boost both your reading comprehension and retention.

You will achieve these ends by reading actively, not passively. I’m going to offer you a five-step method for active reading. Once you learn it (and this method will admittedly take some time to master), your scholarly performance will dramatically improve—as will your mental health, emotional well-being, and overall shine.

Before we turn to the method, I need to stress some important caveats. This reading method is not appropriate for all texts. It can work extremely well with most scholarly books and articles in the humanities and social sciences, and to a lesser extent with comparable works in the natural sciences. It is not appropriate for canonical works from the premodern and classical periods—the kind we use as original sources, such as Plato’s *The Republic*, or Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. This is because the method is designed to help you jump around within a text, locate the most salient points, and skim over the less pithy parts. Most modern scholarly writing should lend itself to this process. Less-contemporary and classical writings often are not structured in the same way. They also are probably being assigned so that you will give them a very close read. And that brings me to another crucial caveat.

Read closely and carefully. I am about to teach you how to move in a nonlinear way through a text, but this does not mean that you should not try to read it all. If you have the time, you should certainly read a work in full. That's what I do. But I also use this method first. I jump around inside the text until I have a strong grasp of the author's main point. Only then do I go back and read the text more fully. Naturally, if you don't have time to read the entire work—and often in school you simply won't have the time you really need—this method will at least equip you to find the work's essentials, so that you can follow the discussion in class.

Here is the most basic concept to absorb: you must read for the thesis, not just the content. The thesis is the author's main argument, and everyone has an argument. If you are drinking at a bar and listen to people's conversations, you'll find that where there is debate, there are theses. Picture a conversation between two loutish, drunken sports fans. One extols the virtues of the Yankees; his interlocutor is praising the Red Sox. At root, the Yankees fan is arguing that the pitching staff makes his entire team superior. That's his thesis. And in order to support his thesis our slobbering enthusiast sputters out in slurred speech the statistics of individual pitchers in the starting rotation. Those stats are his evidence. They form the backbone of his thesis. Part of your job as an undergraduate or grad student is to spot the backbone of every thesis, locate its weakest links, and break them.

There are two main reasons why you must read for thesis, not just content. The first is that academia is all about arguments, and students must learn to critique those arguments. Spotting and dissecting an argument (which we call a thesis) is your primary task with any text. You might be assigned five different books on the French Revolution. How many times do you really

need to read that a king lost his head? Isn't once enough? You have five different books because each author has a different interpretation of those events. Your first task, therefore, is to identify each author's particular interpretation as expressed in her thesis. Your second task is to take that thesis apart by finding its weakest links. (Starting to get it?) In essence, you are on a search-and-critique mission when you read. You are searching for the thesis, and then you aim to critique it. The "critique" part means that you will be assessing the book's strengths as well as its weaknesses. Your critique must always be balanced. But it helps to begin with a critical eye. No one writes a perfect book, and that's okay. The aim is to advance our understanding. The question is whether any given author has moved us in the right direction. Do her thesis and her evidence stand up under close scrutiny? If they do, then we can consider it a meaningful contribution to the scholarly literature, because it brings us closer to the truth.

Just to be extra clear, since this approach is crucially important to your success, let's try a simple example of active reading. We'll do it by identifying and critiquing the thesis in a brief clip from an old movie. In a scene from the 1980 comedy film *Airplane*, we see two different news broadcasts. On the American news, the anchorman states that a terrible fire raged through downtown Moscow, leaving death and destruction in its wake. Next we see the Soviet broadcast of the same event, in which the anchorman says something like: "A glorious fire blazed through downtown Moscow, clearing the way for a brand new tractor factory." Although you were probably born long after the Soviet Union collapsed, you might know that Soviet news was highly censored, downplaying or concealing any problems in Soviet society. So let's imagine that we had to critique both

interpretations of this event. What would we do? Let's start with the Soviet broadcast.

First, you need to identify the anchor's thesis. The fire was a positive event for Moscow, and perhaps for Soviet society more generally. In contrast, we can say that the American anchor's interpretation was that the fire was a negative event, leaving death and destruction in its wake. Fortunately, both anchors agree on one basic fact: that a fire occurred. The rest is open to interpretation. Just as with the French Revolution, each author provides a different interpretation of the event, whether it's a king losing his head or a fire in the city.

So how would we critique the Soviet anchor's thesis? Start by listing the assumptions he is making.

1. The fire was glorious.
2. It cleared the way for a new tractor factory.

We can question each in turn. The assertion that the fire was glorious is subjective. There is nothing intrinsic to a fire (or almost any event, for that matter) that makes it positive or negative. We typically judge an event's nature based on its effects. In this case it seems that the fire's gloriousness is evidenced by its effect: it cleared the way for a tractor factory. So if the claim about the factory turns out to be suspect, then the fire's gloriousness would also fall into question.

To challenge the second claim, that the fire cleared the way for a tractor factory, you would ask whether there is evidence of preexisting plans for a factory on that location. Had funds been earmarked for such a factory? Are there written records proving that someone of influence previously decided to build such a factory? If not, then the Soviet claim smells fishy to me.

Likewise, if we were to critique the American anchor's claims that the fire was terrible, we would seek evidence of death and destruction. How many people actually died? Can we prove that they died as a result of the fire? Was anything actually destroyed by this fire? Did buildings collapse? You get the point. We are searching for hard evidence to bolster a claim. And if we cannot find it, if the author does not provide it, or if the author's evidence is more assertion than fact, then we can probably break the back of this thesis.

There is a second reason why you must train yourself to read for thesis, not just content. In some undergraduate courses, and in most graduate ones, you will be quickly overwhelmed by the amount of reading. If you try to read every word of every book assigned, you will drown. You will not sleep. You will not eat. Instead, you will become one of the many Book Zombies—gaunt, sullen figures who haunt their department hallways. They appear as apparitions, weighed down by the mass of books loaded in their backpacks, creeping from class to class, unable to articulate a coherent thought. We call this condition “logolapsia” (I just made that up), and it afflicts unsuspecting students who failed to read this slender guide. Sufferers cannot express an author's thesis, because they have not learned to read in an active, targeted manner. Here comes the cure, or the prevention. It is a five-step process with one key technique. I'll give you the overview first, and then I'll explain each step.

#### HOW TO READ ACTIVELY

Step 1. Analyze the title and subtitle.

Step 2. Scrutinize the table of contents.

Step 3. Read the last section first.

Step 4. Read the introduction.

Step 5. Target the most important chapters of the book, or sections of an article.

Your most useful tactic in this process: restate what you have read in your own words and write it down.

*Always remember: restate and write down.*

### *Step 1. Analyze the Title and Subtitle*

Titles are clues to the author's thesis. You are on a search-and-critique mission when you read. Your first task is to seek out the author's thesis, and the title and subtitle will often serve as shortcuts. If the title is generic and bland, like *A History of Russia*, then it won't help you much. But if the title is something like *The Clash of Civilizations*, then you have a pretty good idea that the author's main argument has something to do with conflict being along civilizational lines. From that you might deduce that previous works in the field have offered different interpretations of how international conflicts can or will occur: perhaps between states, or within states as civil wars, or along racial, ideological, or class divides. Who knows? The point is that from the main title alone you can begin to extract useful information about the author's thesis. By actually thinking about what the title really means, you are saving time by priming yourself to spot the thesis.

Subtitles, which are the phrases that typically follow a colon, are your next helpful hints. If the full title and subtitle are something like *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*, you might guess that the author is arguing against the notion that great ideas arise from solitary brainiacs contemplating gravity

under an apple tree. Or consider *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*. You can expect that the author is making a scientifically based, probably biologically based argument that humans have an inherent tendency to be good, or perhaps merely a capacity to be good. You don't really know, of course, until you read further. You are just priming your brain to be on the lookout for the thesis. What you don't want to do is gloss over the title and subtitle without taking a moment to envision the likely thesis. Defeating the Book Zombies begins by actively thinking about everything you read, starting with the titles.

*Step 2. Scrutinize the Table of Contents*

Chapter titles are also clues to the author's thesis. Authors are using each chapter to buttress their main thesis. Each chapter serves as a subargument supporting the overall thesis. So take the time to read each chapter title carefully. Go through the same process I just described regarding the book's title and subtitle. Ask yourself what the author might be trying to convey in each chapter. Again, a bland chapter title like "Introduction" or "The Early Years" won't help. But often chapter titles can be highly suggestive of the author's point of view. By the way, subheadings (which are those little titles that separate the sections within a chapter or within an article) can serve the same purpose as all other titles. When you spot them, think about what clues they might be offering.

Consider the book *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*. From the title and subtitle you might guess that the author is arguing that America, or someone, could have won the Vietnam War, but someone chose not to win it. When you explore the chapters in the table of contents, you find titles such as the following:

“Insurgency,” and “Commitment,” and “Attack,” but these don’t tell you a heck of a lot. Then you spy some other chapter titles, including the following: “Betrayal.” Hmm. I wonder what the author is suggesting? I guess somebody betrayed somebody else. But who could it be? Here’s another chapter title: “Self-Imposed Restrictions.” Humph. Who the heck would impose restrictions on himself, and why? And another one: “Self-Destruction.” So we think back to the main title, *Triumph Forsaken*, and we can surmise that someone had a triumph available to him in this war, yet he defeated himself (or itself, if the culprit is a government or a country). Again, you don’t really know anything about this book, and you have yet to read a single sentence. Nonetheless, you have a reasonable sense of where the author might be heading with his thesis. So now it’s time to delve into the text and find out.

### *Step 3. Read the Last Section First*

Now that you are primed to locate and identify the author’s thesis, go immediately to the last paragraph of the book or article. I do not recommend this method with a mystery novel, but it can be tremendously helpful with scholarly texts. The author typically wants to leave you with her most important idea. If she is thoughtful, in more ways than one, she will encapsulate her main idea in the final paragraph. The thesis is not always there, but it shouldn’t be far away. At least it will be in the final section, whether that is a subsection or a concluding chapter. You are searching now for that one golden paragraph, the one that contains the big idea, crisply summarized. When you find that paragraph, *restate it in your own words*.

There is no technique more important than restating the ideas you read in your own words and then writing them down.

The more you do this, the better you will comprehend what you have read, and the more likely you will be to remember it later, namely during class discussions. So get in that habit. *Restate and write down.* And when you do, try using simple words. Don't think that you need to be poetic or highbrow, deftly peppering your synopses with rarified words drawn from your GRE vocabulary list. Forget that. That's not important at this moment. Just crystallize the author's ideas in the simplest terms necessary. Note that I did not say "the simplest terms possible." It is always possible to simplify an idea to the point of making it simplistic, and thereby lose its meaning. You must learn to craft pithy syntheses of others' ideas in the simplest terms necessary—necessary to capture the author's meaning. Naturally you will not do this for every sentence in the text; only for the most important sentences and paragraphs.

Next I recommend reading the first paragraph of the conclusion. If you are dealing with an entire book, this will be the beginning of the chapter entitled "Conclusion," if you are lucky, or simply the final chapter, whatever it is called. If you are dealing with a scholarly article, then there might be a subheading labeled, "Conclusion," or there might be a line break with some white space separating it from the main body of the article, or there might be no clear indication of a concluding section at all. In that event, where no clear concluding section is apparent, you will have to skim backward from the end, looking for key words or phrases that indicate a conclusion. I'll say more about this in a bit.

The first paragraph of a conclusion might contain the thesis, or it might reinforce the thesis that you already gleaned from the final paragraph. Again, you might not find the thesis in either the last paragraph or the first paragraph of the final section, but you are most likely to find it there.

*Step 4. Read the Introduction*

Now turn back to the introduction and skim it. See how quickly you can come to the same golden paragraph you found in the conclusion. It won't be worded the same way, of course. It is not an exact replica, copied and pasted into the text, but it will contain the same basic concept, expressed in similar language. I want you to use your *restate and write down* technique. Render this golden paragraph in your own words and write it down. Compare it to what you did for the conclusion's golden paragraph. How closely do they match? If they are basically the same, you have probably found the thesis and grasped its essence. That's not a guarantee at this point, but you are probably closer than you think. If your two renderings do not match, then you have either misidentified the thesis and need to read more before you can be certain, or you simply need to modify your understanding of the thesis. There may have been a greater nuance to the thesis when expressed in the conclusion as opposed to the introduction. Focus on the golden paragraph from the conclusion. It is usually the right one.

You might reasonably ask why you did not read the introduction first instead of waiting until step 4. The answer is that introductions often contain the thesis, but conclusions almost always do. Introductions contain all sorts of other information that might bog you down in the beginning of your search-and-critique mission. They might begin with an arresting anecdote. They might review the existing literature and the debates within the field, in the process explaining how their own work contributes to this debate. They might spend pages thanking their friends and family, spouses and mistresses, librarians, archivists, other scholars, and all of the famous people whom

they have never actually met, but with whom they wish to be associated. (Usually they spare us by placing this in an acknowledgments section, but sometimes they sneak it into the intro.) Your best bet for quickly locating the thesis will be by scanning the conclusion first. The introduction should help confirm and reinforce your understanding of the thesis, or, as I said, it might cause you to modify your understanding of it.

*Step 5. Target the Most Important Chapters or Sections*

How can you possibly know what the most important sections are? (I hear you asking.) Once you know the thesis, it's relatively easy to isolate the key sections. For example, if the thesis is that President Johnson chose war in Vietnam over a chance for peace, then a section on the history of Vietnam's century-old wars with China might be interesting and even useful background information, but it probably won't take you directly to the main evidence supporting the thesis. And it is this main body of evidence that you now seek. Remember, if the Soviet anchorman claimed that the fire cleared the way for a tractor factory, and that this was a good thing, then you must find evidence of plans for such a factory. The author is certain to provide it. But whether her evidence is convincing depends on two things. Pay attention to this next idea.

There are only two ways we prove points in scholarship: through empirics and through logic. Empirics are the tangible bits of evidence we can assemble: the severed head of a king, the burned-out building from the fire, the diary of the midwife who tells us how she lived. Logic is the reasoning that rests above the facts. If someone tells you he saw a triangle with four sides, you know he's geometrically challenged. This means that your two

lines of attack are to question either the author's empirical evidence or her leaps of logic. As you read, write down the assumptions that the author is making. Later, you will go through your list and ask whether the author supported each claim with adequate evidence and sound logic.

Everything I have just outlined applies just as readily to an article or individual chapter as it does to a book. If you were assigned an article, you would contemplate the title and subtitle for clues to the thesis, scan the subheadings for further hints, and read the last paragraph first. (Obviously, if the last paragraph is a single sentence, you will start with the previous paragraph.) And if you were assigned a chapter from a book, and not the book itself, you would immediately look up the book from which the chapter came. Never—let me repeat this for emphasis—NEVER prepare for a discussion of a chapter without first having considered the entire book. You do not have to read the entire book, but you absolutely must have a general idea of the author's thesis in that book. Why? Because the chapter will serve as one supporting element in the larger argument. And you must always know what the larger argument is. Which brings me to another useful tip.

#### FIND LINKS TO SOMETHING LARGER

Always link an argument to something larger. Especially when critiquing an article or book chapter, you need to figure out what the bigger issue is. Nearly all scholars are tackling a small piece of a larger puzzle. The analysis of a particular battle likely reflects the author's view of the whole war. Analysis of a particular war might reflect the author's view of how the countries in question have fought other wars, or conducted their foreign policies, or subjugated peoples, or allowed macroeconomic super-

structures to shape their actions. Whatever the issue in front of you might be, there is probably a larger puzzle that the author is hoping to solve. You need to know what that bigger picture is in order to understand the article or chapter. So when you finish your search-and-critique mission, after you have identified the thesis and critiqued it, your final step is to link that thesis to the larger puzzle. As you will learn later in this book, this is good training for when you begin your own research, because you, too, will need to link your own narrow research question to a larger puzzle.

#### ACTIVE SKIMMING

You rarely have time to read every word of every book or article. It's great if you do have the time, but don't bank on it. Given your time constraints, you need to be maximally efficient. Skimming is essential. Once you have decided which chapters to read, scan each chapter to see if there are any subheadings. Use these exactly as you would a title or subtitle. The subheadings are there to give you clues to the thesis and to point you toward the most important bits of evidence. Read every subheading first to gain a sense of the chapter's basic structure. You can then select the most important-sounding subsections to focus on.

When pressed for time, you must skip paragraphs. The paragraph is your author's smallest idea chunk. Sentences are the elements that explain or support the paragraph, but paragraphs are the bite-sized nuggets that allow you to skip around. In general, you should skip in paragraph chunks. Therefore, the indentation is your best friend.

Read each topic sentence—the first sentence of each paragraph—and make a decision: do you read the rest of that paragraph or skip it? Read or skip? That's all you need to decide.

This is a skill that you will definitely improve with practice. So how to make the right decision?

Use your key technique: restate and write down. (You don't need to write anything down if you decide to skip.) Just restate each paragraph's topic sentence in your own words. Remember to use the fewest and simplest words necessary to convey the author's meaning. The topic sentence should express the paragraph's main idea, or at least it should give you a pretty clear indication of what that paragraph is about. Once you grasp the meaning of the topic sentence, you can make a judgment about whether the paragraph is worth your time.

Most scholarly texts have a certain form. The idea in one paragraph will often be supported by numerous subsequent paragraphs. So if you decide that you don't need the information in the paragraph containing one idea, then you can quickly skip all the subsequent paragraphs supporting it. And you can easily determine if the subsequent paragraphs are supporting a previous idea by restating their topic sentences.

#### PRACTICE ROUND

I'd like to walk you through an article while applying this method. I can't reprint the entire text, as that would violate copyright law, but I can use certain sections of it. When I teach my students how to read in this way, I like to use the historian Marc Trachtenberg's writings, because they are well-structured and clear, though they contain complex ideas.

We're about to skim, or actually just talk about how to skim, an article on the First World War. As I write this book, historians across the globe are intensely focused on World War I because it is exactly one century since the war began. If you

know absolutely nothing about World War I, that's perfect. You don't need to know anything. This method is designed to help you get smart fast on any subject in the humanities or social sciences. So let's apply our five-step process, one step at a time.

*Step 1. Analyze the Title and Subtitle*

"The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment."<sup>1</sup>

The first thing we do to beat the Book Zombies is to stop and think. Remember that we are on a search-and-critique mission. We are searching for the author's thesis: his main argument. So what might a title like this mean? Clearly it must have something to do with World War I. Because it uses the phrase "The Coming of," it must involve the origins of the war. And when it says "A Reassessment," it must mean that the author is going to reassess something—presumably something about the origins of the First World War. So what exactly could he be reassessing? Most likely he will reassess the reasons why the war came. Let's find out. The purpose of thinking actively about the title and subtitle of any text is that it primes you to be more receptive to spotting the thesis when you meet it.

*Step 2. Scrutinize the Table of Contents*

In a book's table of contents, each chapter title offers clues to both the argument within that chapter and the type of evidence that will be presented. Within a chapter or an article, the sub-headings do the same thing.

1. Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), ch. 2.

The first subheading in this chapter is: “The Fischer Thesis.” Ever heard of the Fischer thesis? No? Terrific. You don’t need to. In fact, it’s better if you haven’t, because that forces you to think about what it could mean. We can guess that some guy named Fischer had a thesis, or argument. And what is that argument likely to be about? Yes! It’s probably an argument about the coming of the First World War. And what is the author likely to say about that argument? Will he agree with it or disagree? I hear you guessing “disagree.” Of course, we don’t know yet what the author will do, but given that his subtitle suggests that he’s going to “reassess” something about the coming of the war, you could reasonably guess that he’s going to be critical of Mr. Fischer’s claims. And of course being critical is what one expects an academic to be. That is, after all, how they earn their living. But in fairness, we don’t yet know for sure what the author’s view is of Mr. Fischer’s thesis. We are simply skimming the subheadings, priming ourselves to spot the author’s own thesis when we meet it.

The next subheading is: “The Rigidity of Military Plans.” What could this mean? So far we suspect that the author is reassessing, which is to say critiquing, explanations for the coming of World War I. We guessed that the Fischer thesis was one such explanation, or argument, about why the war came. So maybe the idea of rigid military plans was another such explanation. And perhaps the author is going to challenge this idea as well.

The next subheading is: “The ‘Cult of the Offensive.’” As it appears in the book, the words “Cult of the Offensive” are in quotes. Let’s say that we have no idea what this phrase is about. Since we know we’re talking about a war, we can guess that there was some idea at the time about offensive action, and maybe it took on some kind of cult status. Maybe people became wedded to this idea, whatever it was. And perhaps this is yet another

explanation for the coming of the war: the adherence to this idea. But who knows at this point? As we continue to read subheadings, we continue to prime ourselves for step 3.

*Step 3. Read the Last Section First*

Some authors are considerate enough to use the subheading called “Conclusion.” If you should find such a marker as this, feel free to do a little jig. The first thing I do is to skim ahead to see how many pages or paragraphs this section contains. I do that merely to get a sense of how much important stuff I’m likely to encounter. If there are only three paragraphs, for example, then I’d better pay extra close attention to every word to be sure I don’t miss the thesis. If, on the other hand, the conclusion is eight pages long, then I need to do more active searching. In this case, Trachtenberg was magnanimous, and we easily find a “Conclusion” subheading. If there is no such subheading, look for an empty space between paragraphs close to the end of the chapter. If you don’t find that, look for key phrases at the start of paragraphs, such as “In conclusion,” “In sum,” “To wrap up,” “Finally,” or words to that effect. As I skim ahead in Trachtenberg’s piece, I see that the conclusion is just over four pages long and contains twelve paragraphs.

You will always read conclusions in their entirety, but let’s begin with the final paragraph. Before we do, let’s remind ourselves what we’ve established. We have an author reassessing something about the origins of the First World War. We found that he addresses what seem to be different explanations for the war. And we suspect that he is critical of some or all of them. We have surmised all this before ever having read a single sentence.

Now it's time to dissect the conclusion using our most important tactic: restate and write down. We are about to restate in our own words what each sentence says. To do this, use the fewest words necessary to convey the author's meaning. After each sentence, I will give my own restatement in my own words, but you should try doing it yourself before reading my restatement. That way you can compare your version to mine. And don't assume that my version is the better one. As long as you are capturing the essential meaning in a synthesized form, don't worry if your restatement differs greatly from mine. The words you use are not important; it's the meaning that matters.

First sentence of final paragraph:

"During this whole process, this interpretation was accepted because it was what people wanted to believe."

What bad luck! We didn't get a clear, simple thesis statement like we had hoped. This sentence seems to come out of nowhere. We have no idea what the author means by "this whole process," but we can live without that knowledge for the moment. We just want to get a handle on the essential meaning of each sentence, even if our rendering is imperfect at this initial point.

Restated by me:

*An interpretation was accepted because people wanted to believe it.*

Second sentence of final paragraph:

"It is important, however, that our basic thinking about issues of war and peace not be allowed to rest on what are in the final analysis simply myths about the past."

Restated by me (and try restating it yourself before you read my version):

*Our thinking about war and peace should not rest on myths about the past.*

Third sentence:

“The conventional wisdom does not have to be accepted on faith alone: claims about the past can always be translated into historically testable propositions.”

Restated by me:

*Don't just have faith that conventional wisdom is correct. Claims can be tested.*

Fourth sentence:

“In this case, when one actually tests these propositions against the empirical evidence, which for the July Crisis is both abundant and accessible, one is struck by how weak most of the arguments turn out to be.”

Restated by me:

*The arguments are weak.*

Note that complex sentences, ones with lots of parts, need to be trimmed down to their bare bones in order to make them more comprehensible. Cut out the parenthetical phrases and clauses and try to locate the sentence's main clause with its subject, verb, and object (S-V-O). In this case, we have S-V-O = “arguments are weak.”

Final sentence:

“The most remarkable thing about all these claims that support the conclusion about events moving ‘out of control’ in 1914 is how little basis in fact they actually have.”

Restated by me:

*Claims that events moved “out of control” in 1914 are unfounded.*

Let's now assemble the restatements because when we combine them, they might give us a briefer, clearer sense of the paragraph's meaning.

People accepted an interpretation because they wanted to believe it. Our thinking about war and peace should not rest on myths about the past. Don't just have faith that conventional wis-

dom is correct. Claims can be tested. The arguments are weak. Claims that events moved “out of control” in 1914 are unfounded.

Remember that we are looking for the author’s main thesis. From the final paragraph of the entire text we can see that he is arguing that interpretations about the war are weak. But is that all that the author wants to say? Is he just tearing down the existing interpretations, or is he also offering some interpretation of his own? Perhaps we’ll find out as we read further, but this is the type of question you need to ask of any text: what is the author really trying to achieve? To figure this out most efficiently, you must not only synthesize the author’s sentences in your own words, you must also question what you are reading. This is what scholars mean when they speak about “engaging” a text. It means to question all aspects of an argument.

I want you to notice one sentence in particular from the restatements above. It’s the one that says: our thinking about war and peace should not rest on myths about the past. Note that this sentence is a little different from the others. It refers to a larger issue beyond the article’s subject, which is the coming of the First World War. Instead, the sentence references the much broader issue of how we think about war and peace, not just this one specific war. When you encounter sentences that link to a larger issue, pay special attention. The author is usually giving you a hint about his overarching aim.

Now let’s turn to the first paragraph of the conclusion. We’ll do the same process of restating each sentence in our own words. The purpose is to glean more information about the author’s thesis. So far, we are assuming that his thesis is simply that the interpretations for the war’s origins are weak and possibly even false.

First sentence of the first paragraph of the conclusion:

“The aim here was not to offer yet another interpretation of the coming of the First World War.”

Restated by me:

*The article's aim was not to provide a new interpretation for the war's origins.* (It looks like we just found the answer to our question above about whether the author was offering his own interpretation of the war's origins.)

Second sentence:

“This was instead meant mainly as an exercise in intellectual housekeeping.”

Restated by me:

*The aim was to clean up our thinking.*

Third sentence:

“There are many claims about the origins of the war that have been accepted more or less uncritically, and the goal here was to test some of the more important ones against the evidence.”

Restated by me:

*Many claims about the war's origins have been simply accepted. This article's aim was to test those claims.*

Fourth sentence:

“What was at stake was not simply our historical understanding of this particular episode.”

Restated by me:

*More was at stake than just our understanding of World War I.*

Final sentence of the paragraph:

“It was really because so much of our thinking today about issues of strategy and foreign policy rests in such large measure on a specific interpretation of the July Crisis that an effort of this sort was worth undertaking.”

Restated by me:

*Our thinking about strategy and foreign policy rests on our interpretation of the July Crisis.*

And now to assemble the restated sentences:

The article's aim was not to provide a new interpretation for the war's origins. The aim was to clean up our thinking. Many claims about the war's origins have been simply accepted. The aim of this article was to test those claims. More was at stake than just our understanding of World War I. Our thinking about strategy and foreign policy rests on our interpretation of the July Crisis.

What do you glean from all of these sentences? From the conclusion's final paragraph we thought that the thesis was that the interpretations of the war's origins are weak. From the conclusion's first paragraph we can see that the author wanted to test the standard interpretations, and he also tells us why. He says that our thinking about war and peace in general is affected by our understanding of why World War I began. Authors don't always link their work to a larger issue, but they should, and so should you.

The next step in this process is to read the entire conclusion, restating and writing down the main ideas. It will not be necessary to do this for every sentence. For the concluding section, you could limit yourself to restating each topic sentence. Once you are done, it's time to turn back to the introduction. Let's have a look at the first paragraph to see if it reinforces or modifies what we now believe to be the author's thesis and his aim.

#### *Step 4. Read the Introduction*

I always scan each section before I read it to get a sense of its girth. The introductory section is roughly two pages and contains five paragraphs. Here's how the article begins.

“The idea that a great war need not be the product of deliberate decision—that it can come because statesmen ‘lose control’ of events—is one of the most basic and most common notions in contemporary American strategic thought.”

Restated by me:

*People think that wars can occur by statesmen losing control.*

Second sentence:

“A crisis, it is widely assumed, might unleash forces of an essentially military nature that overwhelm the political process and bring on a war that nobody wants.”

Restated by me:

*People assume that a crisis could cause a war that no one wants.*

Third and final sentence of the article’s first paragraph:

“Many important conclusions, about the risk of nuclear war and thus about the political meaning of nuclear forces, rest on this fundamental idea.”

Restated by me:

Hold on. This sentence should definitely shake you out of your slumber and ward off the Book Zombies. I thought we were reading an article about World War I. I don’t know much about history, but I don’t think they had nuclear weapons back then. Why is the author suddenly, and in the article’s third sentence, talking about nukes?

When you see something jarringly out of place, it might be a clue to the author’s larger aim. We don’t know exactly what that is yet, but we definitely want to pay attention. So to restate the sentence:

*People think the same way about the risk of nuclear war—that it could happen by accident.*

Let’s try the same process with paragraph two.

“This theory of ‘inadvertent war’ is in turn rooted, to a quite extraordinary degree, in a specific interpretation of a single historical episode: the coming of the First World War during the July Crisis in 1914.”

Restated by me:

*The idea that wars can happen by accident, the “inadvertent war theory,” stems largely from an interpretation of World War I.*

Second sentence of paragraph two:

“It is often taken for granted that the sort of military system that existed in Europe at the time, a system of interlocking mobilizations and of war plans that placed a great emphasis on rapid offensive action, directly led to a conflict that might otherwise have been avoided.”

Restated by me:

*People assume that offensive war plans caused a war that could have been avoided.*

What follows next is a series of quotes. The next several sentences each contain a person’s name and a quote about the war. You will often see this kind of structure in the introductory part of a scholarly text. That’s because the author is laying out the claims that others have made in order to show that he is not erecting a straw man. He is providing evidence that actual people have made these claims. And presumably the author is going to show how wrong they all are. I’m going to skip over those quotes because our main focus right now is to grasp the author’s thesis and his aim.

Let’s start employing the method of reading topic sentences (the first sentence of a paragraph), restating it, and then deciding whether to read the full paragraph or skip it. Read or skip: that is the question. Here’s how the next paragraph, paragraph 3, begins.

“This basic problem, the argument runs, was compounded by a whole series of other factors.”

Restated by me:

*There was a problem made worse by other factors.*

So we don't know what “this basic problem” is referring to—and that's good. It forces us to read actively. It wakes us up and ensures that we are engaging the text, actually thinking about what's being said as we try to follow a logical flow of ideas. It's at points like these that you have to make a decision. Do you go back and read the previous paragraph in full, or can you continue reading forward even though you're not sure exactly what's going on?

This is the point where my students typically have minor panic attacks. They say things like, “What if I skip something important?” Guess what. You might, especially in the early stages of learning this method. But with practice, you will quickly come to make better decisions about what to read and what to skip. Don't just trust me on this. Try it out for a few weeks. Resist the temptation to read every word in your first encounter with an article, chapter, or book. Obviously, if you have enough time, you should read everything, but rarely will you have that much time. You'll most likely be loaded down with multiple readings from numerous classes, and trying to read every word, as I said before, will deprive you of sleep, hinder your performance, and shatter your spirit. It's worth giving this method a try because it will save you time in the long run, even though you may initially miss some important points in a text.

So let's decide to skip this paragraph about the problem being compounded by many other factors. We can always return to it later if we have time for a second, more thorough pass through the article.

The next paragraph begins:

“The term ‘inadvertent war’ can have many meanings.”

Read or skip? What’s your decision? I think this could be important because we know from the opening paragraph of the whole article that the author’s thesis involves the idea of inadvertent wars, meaning wars that happen by accident. Maybe here he will define this term that is central to his thesis. We should probably pay attention. In fact, most scholars are concerned with defining their terms. You will discover this repeatedly in scholarly texts. Authors need to define their terms so that readers can be certain precisely what the author is trying to explain. When you meet paragraphs like these, it’s wise to pay attention. That said, let’s skip it for now because my main purpose is to illustrate this skimming method.

Looking ahead to the next paragraph we find this topic sentence:

“The main purpose of this article is to examine the idea that World War I was in this sense an inadvertent war.”

Hallelujah! We have hit the jackpot, my friends. This is the kind of sentence we fantasize about. It is the Rosetta Stone of sentences. (Okay, enough hyperbole. You get the point.) If you ever use a highlighter, use it now. By the way, I recommend highlighting only when truly valuable sentences appear, like this one. Students who don’t know what they’re doing tend to highlight everything. Resist that urge. Highlights should be shortcuts to an author’s main points and key bits of evidence supporting those points. If you highlight too many sentences, you’ll be wasting time later when you are reviewing the text.

This sentence is so clear that it hardly needs restating, but let’s do it anyway. Try putting it in your own words before looking at how I rendered it.

Restated by me:

*Was World War I inadvertent?*

That appears to be the main question driving this article. The most important things to identify in any scholarly text are the question, the answer (which is called the thesis), and the evidence on which the thesis is based. Although the author did not pose that wonderful sentence in question form, I think we can render it as a question, because that's what it really means. The author states that his aim is to examine whether the idea that World War I happened by accident is sound. And because we read the conclusion first, we know his answer to this question is "no." His conclusion said that this interpretation was based on myths about the past, accepted on faith, and rested on remarkably little evidence.

So we now have what we believe to be the author's question:

Was World War I inadvertent?

The author's possible thesis:

World War I was not inadvertent.

We have a sense of what his evidence might be: an analysis of the prevailing arguments about this war, such as the Fischer thesis, the idea of rigid military plans, the idea of a cult of the offensive, and so on. However, we would need to read more of the text before we could safely conclude that all of this is correct. And in fact when we do, we find that the author has a more nuanced view. We can discover that greater nuance quickly by reading topic sentences, deciding whether the paragraph is likely to explain the thesis, and if it isn't, skipping it and immediately making the same assessment of the next paragraph. Even though we cannot at this early stage be certain of the question and thesis, we are zeroing in on them much faster than if we had read passively, one sentence after the next, starting at the beginning,

without ever restating the key passages in our own words. This method is therefore saving you time and heightening your comprehension.

We have also identified what seems to be the author's larger aim: to assess American strategic thinking about the risks of nuclear war. He claims that this strategic thinking relates to our understanding of World War I.

Although the discussion of this method has taken a bit of time, if you had been applying it to a text without all of my interventions and explanations, it would not have taken much time at all. The actual amount of reading you would have done would have been remarkably little. I would like you to get to the point where you can extract an author's question, thesis, and larger aim within fifteen minutes. And if you only had fifteen minutes to spend on each reading assignment, you could at least go into a class discussion the following day and be able to follow it. With a little bit more time, you can extract the key bits of evidence on which the thesis is based, and then you can begin to critique it by assessing its logic. We'll work on the critiquing skill more intensely in chapter 2.

### *Condensing Complex Sentences*

Sometimes sentences can be overwhelming. They have so many phrases and clauses that our brains have to work overtime just to make sense of them. One way to deal with such troublesome sentences is to chop them down to size. Cut out the chaff and remake them into simple statements by restructuring them. Cut out parenthetical parts and isolate the subject, verb, and object. Here, for example, is the first sentence of the opening paragraph in the first subsection called "The Fischer Thesis."

“In the early 1960s, the German historian Fritz Fischer set off a storm of controversy by arguing that the German government decided to seize the opportunity created by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, and adopted a policy designed to lead to a European war.”

Restated by me in simple sentence form:

*Fischer argued that Germany intended to go to war after the Archduke's assassination.*

I identified the subject, Fritz Fischer, and asked what Mr. Fischer did. He argued. Yes, he set off a controversy, but he did so by arguing. So what did he argue? That Germany adopted a policy. But obviously adopting a policy is not terribly controversial, so that can't be the heart of it. I'm asking myself, as I study this sentence, what's the important issue here, especially in light of what I've already learned about the article so far. I know it's about inadvertent war, so the key phrase would seem to be “designed to lead to a European war.” When I condense, I strip out most adjectives, such as European, and I sometimes simplify the wording. That gives me, “Fischer argued that Germany intended to go to war.” I might not even need the additional information about the Archduke's assassination, but I'll throw it in there for now since it adds a sense of timing.

The very next sentence of this opening paragraph of the Fischer Thesis subsection reads:

“This thesis was first laid out, rather obliquely, in a chapter in Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Grab for world power) . . .”

I'm not even going to finish the sentence at this point in my search phase of reading. I can assume that the rest of the paragraph will discuss how Fischer's controversial thesis was presented and perhaps how it was received. I might next read the topic sentences of each subsequent paragraph, condensing and

restating them, and decide whether they are worth digging into at this point. I know that the first and last paragraphs of any book, chapter, or subsection are usually the most important, so I'm eager to see what the final paragraph of this subsection says.

"There is no need, however, to resolve the war origins question here. It is sufficient to note that a whole range of interpretations is possible, and that therefore one does not have to take a particularly dark view of German intentions in 1914 in order to question the 'inadvertent war' theory."

Restated in a nutshell:

*Let's not worry about the war's origins right now. Germany need not have intended on a war in order for us to question the idea that the war was inadvertent.*

And then we look at the very first sentence of the next subsection called, "The Rigidity of Military Plans."

"The argument that the German government consciously and systematically engineered a European war in 1914 is quite weak."

Sometimes there's no need to restate. It's pretty clear. Now we know what the author thinks of the Fischer thesis, or at least an extreme version of it. He thinks it's flawed. We also have a pretty good sense of what this article is about, what its aims are, and how it is structured.

#### THE RECAP

The reading method I have just described can work with almost any text in the humanities or social sciences, so long as that text makes an argument. The most essential aspects of active reading are as follows:

- Read for thesis, not just content.
- Search for and critique each thesis.
- Use the five-step process to locate and assess the author's question, thesis, and key evidence.
- Identify if possible the author's larger aim.
- Use titles, subtitles, chapter titles, and subheadings as clues to identify the thesis.
- Restate and write down in your own words what each important sentence means.
- Restate topic sentences and skip paragraphs that reiterate or elaborate on ideas you have already grasped.
- Condense complex sentences by isolating the subject, verb, and object.

Book Zombies will eat your brains if you read passively. They'll also wreck your academic experience. Defeat them by engaging a text. Restating key passages in your own words is one of your most powerful weapons against confusion. And as your active reading improves, you'll be able to write and speak with clarity and force. As you proceed through any scholarly text, your five-step process, combined with your tactic of restating and writing down, will do more than just allow you to locate the author's question, thesis, key evidence, and larger aim. It will also ease your way to critiquing the text, which is what we'll focus on next.