

# ...Something Like A Reading Ethics...

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## Reading as a Moral Problem

Think back to the last time you stopped reading a book mid-way through. Did you feel bad about setting down a book knowing that you'd never pick it up again? If you did feel bad, it's not your fault. We moralize reading. Reading is an unquestioned good. Something that our ADHD-prone kids should be doing more. Why is that? What might we do about it?

We feel bad about not finishing books because we've been trained to read in only one moment of our lives with only one type of material and in only one way. For the most part, we learn to read only when we're very young. Not finishing the book or story was met with some mix of disappointment and disapproval from our parents and teachers. Re-reading is born as a moral practice, one that good girls and good boys did well and completely and aloud for all to hear. Further, when we learn to read, we do so with only one set of materials: simple story narrative. Coupled with the moral position of striving to please parents and teachers and avoid the public ridicule of classmates, the style of reading we engage these simple narratives becomes the foundation for how we eventually read all other things. Because we like suspense and the slow reveal of character and plot development, we read in a linear fashion that allows the author of a written work to set the pace. Of course, simple narratives are not the only reading we encounter in school and life, but all those other reading materials—dictionaries, instruction sets, academic writing—lack the formalized instruction that accompanies our first reading experiences. All reading becomes based in the style of one type of reading material.

Our paucity of reading styles causes problems when we enter college or graduate school or law school and, maybe, go on into academic careers. We often open up an academic essay to begin with the first

sentence and continue on until its last, allowing the argument to unfold as if Stephen King wrote it. Compounding the problem, the sheer volume of our reading loads always leaves us feeling bad for not reading more and never being able to read enough.

## Reading as an Ethical Problem

In response to this problem, we might want to develop something like a reading ethics that is not the moralized imperative about reading *all* the things but a productive practice for *how* we read, especially texts that are academic or philosophic in nature. These ethics are far less concerned with what one *ought* to do and much more concerned with the practical and pragmatic techniques one might use for reading and/as responding. Such reading ethics do not disavow reading completely, accurately, or fairly. Instead, these reading ethics are interested in producing inventive responses.

These ethics start with an assumption that our paradigmatic reading styles—again, especially for academic texts—might be more productively shaped by the ways we typically read a dictionary rather than the ways we typically read a novel. In the latter, we read completely and linearly, while the former we read situationally and productively. One might charge this approach as overly instrumental and numb to the pleasures of reading in those traditional ways. In response, I'd suggest that just as we "lose ourselves" in narratives that we find in novels, we can also lose ourselves (read: produce unexpected results) in a dictionary or other reading materials by tracing out connections and relations that exist within but across the alphabetic or logical argument imposed upon the piece.

I'm writing this post in response to discussion I started over on Facebook. There, I complained (read: whined) that, as a peer reviewer for essays submitted to academic journals, I often come across submissions that neglect to read and/or fairly cite its own source materials. This is not a complaint about articles not citing certain things, though that complaint can be leveled in some cases. It is more about not fairly or productively engaging the very things someone does engage. This happens in a lot of ways, most of which (I am fairly certain) is probably innocent but, nonetheless, still badly positions a prior reading encounter. [Much more should be said here about *who* we cite and how we construct representative accounts of established academic conversation, but my focus here is one reading well in a way that might help us read more too, which, I hope, can help us read more in response to this important problem.] I think these citation practices—at least in a humanities fields that can be somewhat theoretically oriented that relies on a great number of intricately written texts—directly result from reading less productively than one might. Again, we have to read so much and it's at least understandable how one might miss readings and misread readings within ongoing conversations. It's hard to keep up. So, what I'll go on to propose below is not a return of moralized reading that insists we read it all and aloud, but perhaps a series of steps to read and cite more productively.

## Ethical Reading

What I am introducing here is something I propose to each and every one of my classes in some form. See, I require a lot of reading in my classes. Too much, in fact. Especially at the graduate level. There is benefit, I think, to pouring on the reading one must pore through even if it's overwhelming for the student. At some point, we who wish to enter into academic fields have to develop strategies and tactics for how all that reading happens, and I'd much rather have a student wade through too much and be compelled to develop those strategies with me rather than later when they're actually on the job. It's a cruel pedagogy, I know, but I support them.

When I introduce the readings and the required reading responses in my graduate and undergraduate classes, I have a standard mini-lecture/pseudo-diatribes I trot out. After talking about the moral frame for most reading, much of which I discussed above, I introduce a series of steps that encourages different styles of reading that, hopefully, allows students to have productive engagements with texts. After making a joke about all books not being Harry Potter books, I talk with students about the reasons they read. Entertainment is one reason, sure, but others always include some variations of instruction and self-preservation. "I want to learn" and "I need a good grade" and "I need to not drink poison!" are popular and, for me, perfect responses.

I then mention that the Latin word for reading "lego, legere" means simultaneously "to read" and "to choose" (which gives us cognates like, selection, collection, deflection, etc.). Now, I mention this to students and here because I want to differentiate reading from knowing it all. It's not about coming to an exhaustive knowledge of what one has read but being able to choose a reading within a text one encounters. The key here is to equate reading with response. One cannot respond to everything in a text but one chooses a point of entry, an item or two to leverage a response. In this sense, reading is like making a map of a territory. We make maps not to include everything but make maps to focus on a particular feature within a territory. [Note: While sharing some features, this is NOT an argument toward hermeneutics and/or the multiplicity of interpretation "present" in any text].

To help facilitate a fast and thorough read, I introduce an **overview procedure**.

**First**, I ask students to overview the work they are about to read. In scholarly discourse, there's a lot of metadata one might sift through that helps structure a reading. Title, chapter titles, subtitles, indices. These can and should be the first layer one engages in "reading" anything. Most of us do this implicitly, but making these steps explicit helps a lot of students (and colleagues) break through that moral imperative to not read an academic essay as if it were *The Chamber of Secrets*.

**Second**, after skimming through a text's architecture, I encourage students to read the introduction and conclusion (or whatever semblance of those two things a particular essay/book has) as an attempt to see *what* is being argued/proposed. When we read academic work, we're not looking to be surprised by the ending. It's not a spoiler alert type of situation. So, I've found that reading it in pieces helps better understand the whole, especially if we must "read" quickly through a number of articles/books to familiarize ourselves with a broad conversation.

**Third**, I propose that students read through the rest, filling in the structures they have pulled out and see *how* (not *what*) the writer is proposing what s/he is proposing. Now, this work can be done more quickly if one has done the other steps first. This does not exclude reading practices such as "close reading" where one might slow down and do at the sentence and paragraph level what I am suggesting at the article/chapter/book level. These practices should scale up and down. That said, as someone who reads a lot of theoretically dense texts, I have found reading at higher speed actually helps rather than hinders one's understanding of said texts. I compare reading theory to riding a bike...if you do it too slow, you lose your balance and fall off (reading/riding too fast causes bad effects too).

Those steps help manage a large reading load. They look to make reading more efficient by relying on common structures that occur across most academic texts. Though, I will say that in my experience, a lot of literary criticism eschews sections and subsections that are favored by rhetoric and more theoretically-oriented texts. My hunch, a bad one probably, is that a lot of scholarly styles prefer to align an argument with the narrative structure found in the object of its analysis (I'm happy to be informed otherwise on this).

Now, in the next series of steps, I offer a **response procedure** that helps a reader gather material for a productive response. Such a response can be and probably should be structured as well. Towards this end, these directions are adopted and adapted from my own grad mentors Daniel Smith and John Muckelbauer at the University of South Carolina and have been inflected by similar reading response guidelines offered by Collin Brooke at Syracuse and Jim Brown at Rutgers-Camden. Again, all these reading response guidelines (and the one I propose below) are designed to generate productive material to use in further written work and not act as strict principles one *must* follow.

### **Step One: Exigence**

For me, this is by far and away the most important part of reading and writing responses. Here, a reader identifies and articulates the exigence for a given work. It might be as simple as a single essay (Scholar X argues that Scholar Y doesn't account for....) or it might be a more broad like "humanism and its problems." It's important here to articulate with as much precision as possible since something as broad as "humanism" easily hides subtle but important differences between scholars. For instance, in a recent "lit review" for my own work, I had to differentiate the humanism that Rosi Braidotti responds to (Descartes and modern project) from the humanism that Peter Sloterdijk responds to (multiple versions of humanism that extend back to at least Cicero in antiquity). Now, it's not that Sloterdijk is MORE complete or more exhaustive than Braidotti but by consolidating both as "against humanism" would shut down a great many avenues of response one might otherwise seek to elaborate in one's own work.

This is also where it is important to read and understand how "lit reviews" are composed. *HOW* one constructs a problem IS the problem (cf. Deleuze's *Bergsonism*). This is an ethic of reading that shows up in one's writing. Sure, some literature reviews are cut-and-pasted and show little difference than the previous lit review on the same topic in another article. Great, then it's easier to read since you've read it before. However, I would argue that the most inventive scholarship is the scholarship that composes novel literature reviews, setting up what will be a novel response. Do not discount the literature review. It's the exigence for whatever a writer seeks to bring.

### **Step Two: Response**

Here, you articulate as best you can what the writer is offering in response to the exigence s/he established. What's the intervention being made? This is usually easy to identify in a general way but harder to articulate in a productive way. When we get readings "wrong," it's most often a case of describing a writer's response in terms not of their own. Swapping out terms can veer a writer's argument into territory they never intended on going or, better put, territory the work is ill-equipped to navigate.

### **Step Three: Terms and Concepts**

While the previous step asks to implicitly pay heed to a writer's terms, this step asks a reader to explicitly identify key concepts and terms. It's vitally important that these terms/concepts be identified as they are the gears that make the essay machine move. These items connect an essay to a longer lineage of writers and working with these gears helps understand what kind of machine you're working with. We might think in terms of hashtags and keywords here, but we should know that "concepts" have a deeper root system and might not be as easily contained in a single term or phrase. We might want to write up a few sentences in response here in addition to a quick list of single words and terms.

### **Step Four: Citations**

Here, readers should identify 3-4 key citations that a work uses. Key citation might be understood as the backbone of an essay without which a fine essay would crumble. Again, these are often easy to spot, but can be tricky if a citation is mentioned briefly but knowing where it occurs in the argument will best determine if that citation is key or not.

[Note: As you might have already noticed, these questions steps tread ground already partially covered in other steps. There's a productive repetition at work here.]

### **Step Five: Questions**

In this step we ask questions of a work. These might be questions of understanding—what does X mean by saying Y—or they might be questions of critique—how could X describe Z in such a way? It is in this step that one's own responses begin to take explicit shape. This response emerges long after a reader has already given as much effort as possible to understand from where a writer is coming and what a writer is bringing to the conversation.

### **Step Six: Speculative Response**

In this step, we try our best to step into the writer's shoes and respond to the questions we raise in step five. This is tough but shouldn't be discounted. When we try to do this, we are being generous by allowing a work to have another say, extending it through our own thinking. This is not to say that we must always suture up any problems we find with a work but that we try to be as generous and forgiving as possible in identifying weaknesses, limitations, problems that we might use in response to the work. To do otherwise would be unethical scholarship (read: shitty).

## **Final Words**

Now, this seems like a lot and, at first, it is! After doing these steps for a while, one internalizes the process and the procedure becomes something like a habit. In my case, these steps once structured how I responded to reading in graduate school but have since greatly influenced *how* I read and respond to texts. Obviously, they inform how I teach reading too (students will notice many repeated phrases and figures). I've found in my own case that reading in this way helps citing what I read in a more generous fashion. We don't have to include all this information in every citation, but for those key citations in our our work, we'd be well served to present them in a robust (even if brief) way. I want to caution here though that these steps are not absolute, and I care less if students or colleagues adopt them exactly. What differentiates these as ethics from the kinds of moral reading practices I started with is that these steps are only proposed tactics and techniques one might practice with for a while in the hopes of generating a habit of productive reading. These steps are not

imperatives to follow, since, if they were such imperatives, they would re-instantiate a moralized reading. Sure, this whole discussion started out about writers not citing another writer well but, for me, this is not so much about accurate representation as one might want in a court of law, but is more about composing a productive response. If we shortchange what we cite (not accounting for exigence and response), then we are giving ourselves less ground to work with and what we create suffers in/as response.

## **The TL;DR Version**

Steps for faster and productive reading

### **Overview**

1. Skim through the work noting the title, chapter, subtitles, indices, etc.
2. Read the introduction & conclusion
3. Fill in the rest by reading through the work

### **Engagement**

1. Exigence (identify the writer's articulation of the exigence)
2. Response (identify what the writer is bringing in response to exigence).
3. Key Terms/Words (locate the key terms and concepts)
4. Key Citations (3-4 key citations the work relies on)
5. Questions (understanding and critique)
6. Speculative Response (speculate how a writer might respond to Questions in Step 5).