

Four Kinds of Reading

| | Fast | Slow |
|-----------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Mental | Information Skim | Ideas Reflect |
| Emotional | Escape Scan | Engage Experience |

Reading for Information

“ . . . reading to learn about a trade, or politics, or how to accomplish something. We read a newspaper this way, or most textbooks, or directions on how to assemble a bicycle. With most of this sort of material, the reader can learn to scan the page quickly, coming up with what he needs and ignoring what is irrelevant to him, like the rhythm of the sentence, or the play of metaphor. Courses in speed reading can help us read for this purpose, training the eye to jump quickly across the page. . . . Quick eye-reading is a necessity to anyone who wants to keep up with what's happening, or learn much of what has happened in the past.” (Hall 164)

Note Taking: Limit to key nouns or phrases. Avoid adjectives/adverbs. Be especially careful about verbs. List distinctive verbs or lists of nouns in quotations.

Reading for Ideas

“With a philosopher one reads slowly, as if it were literature, but much time must be spent with the eyes turned away from the pages, reflecting on the text. . . . [I]ntellectual writing . . . requires intellectual reading, which is slow because it is reflective and because the reader must pause to evaluate concepts.” (Hall 165)

Note Taking: Summarize key ideas, sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph.

Reading to Escape

“This reading is the automated daydream, the mild trip of the housewife and the tired businessman, interested not in experience and feeling but in turning off the possibilities of experience and feeling. . . . [T]he reader is in control: once the characters reach into the reader's feelings, he is able to stop reading, or glance away, or superimpose his own daydreams.” (Hall 165, 166)

Note Taking: Focus on personal reactions to the reading. Summarize plot.

Reading to Engage

“If we read a work of literature properly, we read slowly, and we hear all the words. If our lips do not actually move, it's only laziness. The muscles in our throats move, and come together when we see the word "squeeze." We hear the sounds so accurately that if a syllable is missing in a line of poetry we hear the lack, though we may not know what we are lacking. In prose we accept the rhythms, and hear the adjacent sounds. We also register a track of feeling through the metaphors and associations of words. . . . [T]he great writers reward this attention. Only by the full exercise of our powers to receive language can we absorb their intelligence and their imagination. This kind of reading goes through the ear--though the eye takes in the print, and decodes it into sound--to the throat and the understanding, and it can never be quick. It is slow and sensual, a deep pleasure that begins with touch and ends with the sort of comprehension that we associate with dream. . . . To read literature is to be intimately involved with the words on the page, and never to think of them as the embodiments of ideas which can be expressed in other terms. . . . Great literature, if we read it well, opens us up to the world, and makes us more sensitive to it, as if we acquired eyes that could see through things and ears that could hear smaller sounds.” (Hall 164-5)

Note Taking: Find emotional center (what is at stake). Note literary conventions, repetitions, and related ideas. Identify things confusing or strange. Summarize or paraphrase whole.

Hall, Donald. "Four Kinds of Reading." Thinking in Writing. 2nd ed. Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan. New York: Knopf, 1983: 162-167.

[Note: While Hall's article, I think, identifies four legitimate types of reading, the thrust of his argument is that not all reading is worthwhile, and literature is frequently misread, either as escapist (his term is narcotic) or philosophical. The chart and terms used here and the references to note taking are mine - Bill Stifler]