

Cultural Heritage in Crisis: Spring 2022
S. Balachandran (sanchita@jhu.edu)

Reading Strategies: Quick guide to parsing a text
[hope you can use this beyond this class]

1. **Why are you reading this?** [“Because my instructor said so” is not a great answer]. Think about what you need to get out of this. Is there a reading prompt or some question you are expected to answer? **Most of the time, I ask you to pay attention to something, usually: what kind of strategy/perspective do we find in this article that tells us about how to document, respond to or recover from disasters/crises as related to cultural heritage.** When there’s no one to tell you, you need to answer this yourself.
2. **How long is it, is this language I am familiar with, and in what detail do I need to read this?** [Detail depends on your answer to #1]. Set aside appropriate time, usually double what you think it will take. Hey, if it takes less time, that’s awesome.
3. **I like to get a quick sense of the overall paper before I start reading it.** Steps 4-7 seem like they will take a lot of time, but really, they are quick skims to get me ready for step 8.
4. **Start with the title. What does it promise?** [Nota bene, or N.B., or “pay attention”: academic titles overpromise a lot and have a lot of colons in them and can be useless in terms of information.]
5. **Next, if there is an abstract** (usually above the actual start to the article), **what does it promise?** [N.B., same on overpromising]. The main argument and interpretations should be here.
6. **Next, what do the introduction and conclusion say this is about?** If no clearly designated “introduction” and “conclusion” sections, they are usually at the beginning and end of each text. The main information you need to summarize the article should be in these two places, taken together.
7. Next, turn to the main content or the “body” of the article. [Yep, creepy]. **What is the layout of the article**—the way the sections are organized often follows the argument being made. If there are no headings or the headings make no sense [typical academic move], you’ll have to scan quickly and see if it is about case studies, etc.
8. By now, you should have a general sense of the context the article addresses (so where are we, when are we, what are we generally talking about) and the main argument/interpretation the author is trying to show. So next is to **read the main content for the details of how the author makes the argument.**

9. How closely you need to read the main text depends on your answer to, you guessed it, #1 above. **Here are some strategies I use:**
 - a. I underline anything that seems especially significant (you know how those sentences feel) or that calls out to me (beautiful writing, surprising, related to something I am thinking about, etc.)
 - b. I often literally write words that come to mind right next to text I want to remember; they act as “post its” for when I am scanning the article again.
 - c. If I don’t understand a word or a term, I circle it and look it up immediately if it seems super necessary to know right now (or save for later to look up so I don’t go down an internet rabbit hole and end up on email)
 - d. If I have no idea what people are saying, I go back up to the beginning of the paragraph or the section and re-read that bit so that I can get my bearings again. If I still have no idea what is going on, I just try to find a key sentence that helps me generally make sense of what is happening.
 - e. My fave tip: if there’s a sentence you love, write it out in a notebook or on a note card (with the reference, page #) and keep these sentences together—I can’t tell you how useful this is in writing final papers—you can just look through them and track ideas that have been interesting to you all semester long! Yeah, it’s more work up front, but saves you time and brain space. It’s a strategy that is mentioned in Sönke Ahrens’ (dense) book [How to Take Smart Notes](#).

10. **Ok, so you’re done reading it**, now what? Based on Ida Yalzadeh’s [amazing zine Navigating Grad School as a Woman of Color](#) (see pg 16, she suggests more than below), **write out the following:**
 - a. Main question/problem the article examines (1 sentence)
 - b. Main argument (1-2 sentences)
 - c. Main takeaway (1 sentence)—in our case, usually what strategy is used, how does it actually work, and how does that give us a new skill for our work?
 - d. If you want this as reference in the future so you never have to read this paper again, I’d suggest you make a 4x6 notecard for each paper and write this out. It takes time, but let me tell you, it is way less time than having to read the paper again. Yalzadeh’s zine talks you through all the information you might consider recording beyond the sentences mentioned above in 10a-c.

11. A lot of what we read is really emotionally difficult. Witnessing and being open to these hard things is important but exhausting work. So, I recommend you do this (at least it helps me): **acknowledge what was hard or made you sad, or even if you hated this reading (and why). Sometimes saying it out loud or writing it down helps.**

12. Take a short break, do something else (but not email, social media). Celebrate ([remember Lucille Clifton’s poem](#))! Or even just stand and look out the window for a few minutes, whatever gives you time (again, even 2 minutes) to process quietly.