

Nicole's Tips for Reading Sociology
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Reading dense material efficiently is a skill that can be learned and honed. While putting in time is definitely part of the equation for deep understanding, there are also ways to use the time we're willing to invest more effectively.

The following are suggestions that have worked for me, and the most common advice coming from other grad students I've talked to¹. I personally find these techniques helpful for two kinds of reading: "skim smarter" and as a precursor to "deeply understand." If you are interested in a more in-depth treatment of reading skills, I suggest the Bureau of Study Council's *Course in Reading and Study Strategies*, which I myself took as an overwhelmed first-year graduate student. More information can be found online at <http://bsc.harvard.edu/rc.html> . Spring sessions are starting February 7th and cost \$25 for undergrads.

1. It's not a novel; don't be afraid to spoil the end.

Try starting with the conclusion of a book or article to get an overview of the takeaways. If you start with what the author thinks they have proven before you read the rest, it will clue you in on where to focus as you read. As you go back to the beginning, you can read with an eye toward the big picture, which in and of itself will make you a more active reader.

2. Define the terms.

What does this author mean by the key terms that they're using? In Sociology, our technical language is often built upon colloquial language. It's important to think about how the author defines (and operationalizes) the concepts used in the piece, because it often differs from the way you or I would use it in common speech.

3. Draw a diagram of the argument.

How does the author get from Point A to Point B? Sociology is interested in how social phenomena relate to one another, so the meat of the reading is usually in that reasoning, or what we call "the mechanisms." A diagram will help you understand and assess the overall logic of the argument. What phenomenon is the author trying to explain? What variables are doing the explaining? This will also help you think about which parts of the argument could use more evidence, where the author makes unwarranted assumptions, and point to parts of the argument you don't understand (because authors are known to be ambiguous at times). If you're thinking about these things, you're a more active reader. Bonus: when writing, if you are able to diagram your own argument, you're on the way towards being a more solid thinker.

¹ In particular, I'd like to thank Josh Wakeham and Matt Kaliner for the interesting discussions about how to approach sociology readings!