Remember that reading is an active process, and the more you work at it the more successful you will be.

**Annotating**

Many readers find it helps to annotate as they read: highlighting keywords, phrases, sentences; connecting ideas with lines or symbols; writing comments or questions in the margin or on sticky notes; circling new words so you can look up the definitions later; noting anything that seems noteworthy or questionable. Annotating forces you to read for more than just the surface meaning. Especially when you are going to be writing about or responding to a text, annotating creates a record of things you may want to refer to.

Annotate as if you’re having a conversation with the author, someone you take seriously but whose words you do not accept without question. Put your part of the conversation in the margin, asking questions, talking back: “What’s this mean?” “So what?” “Says who?” “Where’s evidence?” “Yes!” “Whoa!” or even ⊔ or ⊕ or texting shorthand like LOL or INTRSTN. If you’re reading a text online, you may be able to copy it and annotate it electronically. If so, make your annotations a different color from the text itself.

What you annotate depends upon your **PURPOSE**, or what you’re most interested in. If you’re analyzing a text that makes an explicit argument, you would probably underline the **THESIS STATEMENT**, and then the **REASONS AND EVIDENCE** that support that statement. It might help to restate those ideas in your own words in the margins — in order to understand them, you need to put them in your own words! If you are trying to **IDENTIFY PATTERNS**, you might highlight each pattern in a different color or mark it with a sticky note and write any questions or notes about it in that color. You might annotate a visual text by circling and identifying important parts of the image.

There are some texts that you cannot annotate, of course — library books, some materials you read on the web, and so on. Then you will need to use sticky notes or make notes elsewhere, and you might find it useful to keep a reading log for this purpose.
What Wounds Deserve the Purple Heart?

On some issues, questions of virtue and honor are too obvious to deny. Consider the recent debate over who should qualify for the Purple Heart. Since 1932, the U.S. military has awarded the medal to soldiers wounded or killed in battle by enemy action. In addition to the honor, the medal entitles recipients to special privileges in veterans' hospitals.

Since the beginning of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, growing numbers of veterans have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and treated for the condition. Symptoms include recurring nightmares, severe depression, and suicide. At least three hundred thousand veterans reportedly suffer from traumatic stress or major depression. Advocates for these veterans have proposed that they, too, should qualify for the Purple Heart. Since psychological injuries can be at least as debilitating as physical ones, they argue, soldiers who suffer these wounds should receive the medal.

After a Pentagon advisory group studied the question, the Pentagon announced, in 2009, that the Purple Heart would be reserved for soldiers with physical injuries. Veterans suffering from mental disorders and psychological trauma would not be eligible, even though they qualify for government-supported medical treatment and disability payments. The Pentagon offered two reasons for its decision: traumatic stress disorders are not intentionally caused by enemy action, and they are difficult to diagnose objectively.

Did the Pentagon make the right decision? Taken by themselves, its reasons are unconvincing. In the Iraq War, one of the most common injuries recognized with the Purple Heart has been a punctured eardrum, caused by explosions at close range. But unlike bullets and bombs, such explosions are not a deliberate enemy tactic intended to injure or kill; they are (like traumatic stress) a damaging side effect of battlefield action. And while traumatic disorders may be more difficult...
to diagnose than a broken limb, the injury they inflict can be more severe and long-lasting.

As the wider debate about the Purple Heart revealed, the real issue is about the meaning of the medal and the virtues it honors. What, then, are the relevant virtues? Unlike other military medals, the Purple Heart honors sacrifice, not bravery. It requires no heroic act, only an injury inflicted by the enemy. The question is what kind of injury should count.

A veteran’s group called the Military Order of the Purple Heart opposed awarding the medal for psychological injuries, claiming that doing so would “debase” the honor. A spokesman for the group stated that “shedding blood” should be an essential qualification. He didn’t explain why bloodless injuries shouldn’t count. But Tyler E. Boudreau, a former Marine captain who favors including psychological injuries, offers a compelling analysis of the dispute. He attributes the opposition to a deep-seated attitude in the military that views post-traumatic stress as a kind of weakness. “The same culture that demands tough-mindedness also encourages skepticism toward the suggestion that the violence of war can hurt the healthiest of minds . . . Sadly, as long as our military culture bears at least a quiet contempt for the psychological wounds of war, it is unlikely those veterans will ever see a Purple Heart.”

So the debate over the Purple Heart is more than a medical or clinical dispute about how to determine the veracity of injury. At the heart of the disagreement are rival conceptions of moral character and military valor. Those who insist that only bleeding wounds should count believe that post-traumatic stress reflects a weakness of character unworthy of honor. Those who believe that psychological wounds should qualify argue that veterans suffering long-term trauma and severe depression have sacrificed for their country as surely, and as honorably, as those who’ve lost a limb. The dispute over the Purple Heart illustrates the moral logic of Aristotle’s theory of justice. We can’t determine who deserves a military medal without asking what virtues the medal properly honors. And to answer that question, we have to assess competing conceptions of character and sacrifice.

— Michael J. Sandel, Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?
Coding

You may also find it useful to record your thoughts as you read by using a coding system — for example, using “X” to indicate passages that contradict your assumptions, or “?” for ones that puzzle you. You can make up your own coding system, of course, but you could start with this one*:

- ✔ Confirms what you thought
- X Contradicts what you thought
- ? Puzzles you
- ?? Confuses you
- ! Surprises you
- ✯ Strikes you as important
- ➔ Is new or interesting to you

You might also circle new words that you'll want to look up later and highlight or underline key phrases.

Summarizing

Writing a summary, boiling down a text to its main ideas, can help you understand it. To do so, you need to identify which ideas in the text are crucial to its meaning. Then you put those crucial ideas into your own words, creating a brief version that accurately sums up the text. Here, for example, is a summary of Sandel's analysis of the Purple Heart debate:

In “What Wounds Deserve the Purple Heart?,” Harvard professor Michael J. Sandel explores the debate over eligibility for the Purple Heart, the medal given to soldiers who die or are wounded in battle. Some argue that soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder

---

*Adapted from Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman, Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content-Area Reading.
should qualify for the medal because psychological injuries are as serious as physical ones. However, the military disagrees, since PTSD injuries are not "intentionally caused by enemy action" and are hard to diagnose. Sandel observes that the dispute centers on how "character" and "sacrifice" are defined. Those who insist that soldiers must have had physical wounds to be eligible for the Purple Heart see psychological wounds as reflecting "weakness of character," while others argue that veterans with PTSD and other psychological traumas have sacrificed honorably for their country.

Thinking about How the Text Works: What It Says, What It Does

Sometimes you'll need to think about how a text works, how its parts fit together. You may be assigned to analyze a text, or you may just need to make sense of a difficult text, to think about how the ideas all relate to one another. Whatever your purpose, a good way to think about a text structure is by outlining it, paragraph by paragraph. If you're interested in analyzing its ideas, look at what each paragraph says; if, on the other hand, you're concerned with how the ideas are presented, pay attention to what each paragraph does.

What it says. Write a sentence that identifies what each paragraph says. Once you've done that for the whole text, look for patterns in the topics the writer addresses. Pay attention to the order in which the topics are presented. Also look for gaps, ideas the writer has left unsaid. Such paragraph-by-paragraph outlining of the content can help you see how the writer has arranged ideas and how that arrangement builds an argument or develops a topic. Here, for example, is an outline of Michael Granof's proposal, "Course Requirement: Extortion"; the essay may be found on pages 235–37. The numbers in the left column refer to the essay's paragraphs.

1. College textbooks cost several times more than other books.
2. However, a proposed solution to the cost problem would only make things worse.
This proposal, to promote sales of used textbooks, would actually cause textbook costs to rise, because the sale of used books is a main reason new texts cost so much.

There is another way to lower costs. Used textbooks are already being marketed and sold very efficiently. Because of this, most new textbook sales take place in the first semester after they’re published, forcing publishers to raise prices before used books take over the market.

In response, textbooks are revised every few years, whether or not the content is outdated, and the texts are “bundled” with other materials that can’t be used again.

A better solution would be to consider textbooks to be like computer software and issue “site licenses” to universities. Once instructors choose textbooks, the university would pay publishers fees per student for their use. Publishers would earn money for the use of the textbooks, and students’ costs would be much lower.

Students could use an electronic text or buy a print copy for additional money. The print copies would cost less because the publisher would make most of its profits on the site license fees.

This arrangement would have no impact on teaching, unlike other proposals that focus on using electronic materials or using “no frills” textbooks and might negatively affect students’ learning.

This proposal would reduce the cost of attending college and help students and their families.

What it does. Identify the function of each paragraph. Starting with the first paragraph, ask, What does this paragraph do? Does it introduce a topic? provide background for a topic to come? describe something? define something? entice me to read further? something else? What does the second paragraph do? the third? As you go through the text, you may identify groups of paragraphs that have a single purpose. Here is a
functional outline of Granof's essay (again, the numbers on the left refer to the paragraphs):

1. Introduces the topic by defining a problem
2. Introduces a flawed solution
3. Explains the flawed solution and the problem with it
4. Introduces a better solution
5–7. Describes the current situation and the dynamics of the problem
8. Outlines the author's proposed solution
9–10. Explains the proposed solution
11–12. Describes the benefits and effects of the proposed solution
13. Concludes

Reading Visual Texts

Photos, drawings, graphs, diagrams, and charts are frequently used to help convey important information and often make powerful arguments themselves. So learning to read and interpret visual texts is just as necessary as it is for written texts.

Taking visuals seriously. Remember that visuals are texts themselves, not just decoration. When they appear as part of a written text, they may introduce information not discussed elsewhere in the text. Or they might illustrate concepts hard to grasp from words alone. In either case, it's important to pay close attention to any visuals in a written text.

Looking at any title, caption, or other written text that's part of a visual will help you understand its main idea. It might also help to think about its purpose: Why did the writer include it? What information does it add or emphasize? What argument is it making? See, for example, how a psychology textbook uses visuals to help explain two ways that information can be represented: