

Improving Reading and Comprehension of American Literary Texts

Some of these ideas might be obvious, and you may have encountered a couple of them in previous courses. Still, using this advice and practicing these active reading techniques will make you a better reader, thinker, learner

1. Decode the text.

Slow down! Read for pleasure and understanding. A literary text is not like the newspaper: you can't skim it quickly. The newspaper puts information into easy-to-read, ordinary language. Literature deliberately makes language strange, surprising. Enjoy its strangeness!

Use your dictionary. Look up the words that are unfamiliar to you. You'll improve not only your comprehension and enjoyment of the text but also your vocabulary and everyday understanding of how language works.

Translate troublesome passages. When you encounter a passage that seems really difficult, try converting it into your own words, into language everyone in the class would understand.

Recognize when the source of your difficulty is a lack of background information. In these situations, I highly recommend a quick and easy web resource, The Literature Resource Center. Go to the K-State Library Site: www.lib.ksu.edu. Click "Databases" > "Literature Resource Center." Then enter the author or title of the book you're reading. You'll instantly have at your fingertips a wealth of background information.

2. Contextualize.

Try to figure out the rhetorical context. Why was this text written? Who is this author? Who is the intended audience? Why did the author write this? What's its purpose?

Try to figure out the historical context. When was this text written? How does it relate to events and ideas of its era? What are the connections between this text and other texts of its era? Are there any connections between this text and texts of another era? If so, what do the *differences* between the two texts tell us about the historical changes between the two eras?

Try to figure out why the text is so important. What is it about this text that makes it worthy of our attention so many years after it was written?

3. Read actively.

Take notes. Write comments in the margins: note the major points, key themes, mind-blowing ideas, or cool images; jot down your own thoughts. Consider keeping a notebook that lets you summarize ideas, plots, themes, and characters. Or you could keep a journal that records your personal responses to each text. The extra note-taking effort will pay off at exam time

Respond to the text. What do you think about what's being written? Do you share the beliefs, ideas, values presented here? Or do they differ from your own?

4. Manage your time.

Deliberately overestimate how much time it will take to complete the assignment. If it takes you approximately an hour to read twenty to thirty pages of text, allot yourself two hours for those pages. If you don't schedule adequate time to do the reading, you may have to read quickly, with less pleasure and understanding. On the other hand, if you schedule a larger-than-needed block of time and finish the assignment early, you can revel in your stress-free free time.

Divide big tasks into smaller tasks. When reading a novel, read a few chapters each day. It's easier than reading an entire novel in one sitting the night before class. It's also less stressful.