

## HOW TO READ...

We will be studying a group of difficult texts this semester – novels, poetry and critical articles – centered around the theme of women’s writing. It is hard enough to read these texts in a superficial way, following the story, main idea, characters and/or argument, but our task is even tougher: to *study* the texts. This means that above and beyond understanding the words on the page (made even more difficult because of the language), we need to follow them off the page. And of course, time is always limited: one wants to “finish” reading and not to prolong a process that already seems to go on forever. But serious reading can also be a pleasure: *knowing* a text and mustering the powers to make connections between its details and the historical and social currents that shaped it only enhances our knowledge. The following tips should help you make the most of your time and the reading experience, and help you connect your thoughts to class discussion, to your essays, and to the final anthology project.

### ...NOVELS:

**1. Write in the book.** As you are reading, underline sentences that catch your attention. Make marks in the margins next to notable moments. Circle key words. Write notes in the margins. Note the page numbers of episodes or passages, or the first appearances of characters, in the front and back covers. Be an *active* reader. By writing in your book, you give yourself a guide to the text—a way of making sense of the novel, of navigating your way through it more quickly (and with a firmer grasp of its contents) than you can through a new copy off the bookstore shelf. This is your copy of the book; you should do whatever you can to it to make it useful to you.

**2. Take notes as you read.** In addition to marks *in* your book, you should take notes as you read. Write down each character’s name; note the page on which they first appear and also the page on which they are first named. Keep track, by taking notes, of the plot. When something happens in a complicated story, make a note of the page number and the gist of the episode. When an event or description seems strange or interesting and therefore *worth discussing during a class session*, make a note of its page number.

**3. Use a dictionary, but sparingly.** When reading a novel in Spanish, the dictionary can be your best friend and greatest enemy: it will aid you in understanding a text that was written for native readers but it will also tack on time to the reading process. How to avoid spending hours looking up words yet still understand the book? You must develop a strategy: resist the temptation to look up every word you don’t know. Can you decipher the meaning from the context of the sentence? Is the word an important or key part of the passage (if it reappears multiple times: yes.)? Read as much for overall meaning as for nuance. You *will* need to use your dictionary (and a Spanish-to-English along with a Spanish-to-Spanish dictionary will help you develop your language skills), but try to use it sparingly. (Note: this tip *does not* apply to poetry!)

**4. Consolidate your notes before class sessions.** Look over your notes, both in the book and on your sheets of paper (or your computer). Reflect on them. Who are these characters? Why did I think that passage on page 97 was so strange? Why did I circle the word “arrepentirse” on page 188? Who exactly is Román again and why did I think his dialogue was worth remembering? Based on your return to these notes (and the passages they refer to), you can generate new, more refined questions for the class session. You can sort out what makes sense and what doesn’t, what provokes your interest, what captures your attention. And you can be better assured that these issues truly matter, that they are not simply the product of a rushed reading of the novel.

**5. Reread in the new light of critical and historical assignments.** When the reading assignment includes critical or historical works, you are faced with two tasks. First, you need to carefully study the critical or historical text: what is its argument? How does the author make the argument? Is the argument logical? What evidence supports the claims? Second, and crucially, you need to *reread* the primary text (the novel) in relation to the secondary text (the critical or historical piece). This does not mean you should begin at page one and proceed to the end of the novel. Rather, it means that you should look back at your notes and the passages you marked in the novel, and take new notes that take account of the new material. This process of reading and rereading does two things: it adds to your knowledge and it sharpens your skills as a reader and scholar.

## ...POETRY:

**1. Read the poem once.** Your first reading is for content, lyricism, musicality, the form of the poem on the page, and the emotion the poem communicates. Read the poem aloud. Look at it. Digest it.

**2. Read the poem again (and again).** Your next reading begins the process of analysis, as you look up every unfamiliar word, dissect the poem's structure, understand underlying themes and ideas, and consider the poem (and poet's) context.

Here are some questions to guide you through this process:

### Structure

- Is the poem narrative (narrativo), lyric (lírico) or dramatic (dramático)?
- Are there stanzas (estrofas), rhyme (rima), a regular structure or free verse (verso libre)?
- How would you describe the tone and perspective of the poetic voice (la voz poética)? How is this voice created?
- Take note of the most important linguistic elements (las imágenes, las figuras retóricas, repeticiones, otros elementos estilísticos): how do they contribute to the poem's meanings?

### Content

- Identify the poem's "mysteries" and try to resolve them (lo difícil, lo ambiguo, lo problemático)
- Find the most significant themes and ideas
- Relate form/structure with content (la forma con el contenido/la estructura)
- Identify moments of continuity with other poetic traditions or conventions

**3. Take notes.** A well-studied poem should be a mess on the page. Take notes on everything, draw in connections between stanzas, write down themes, decipher metaphors, identify symbols and their possible meanings, look up words and references, and assemble questions. No detail is too small to merit consideration!

**4. Organize your thoughts.** Reflect on all of your readings, and examine the poem. Translate your marked-up version of the text into coherent commentary and questions that will serve as notes for the poem. Consider the biographical information you have about the poet, and other readings from the class to relate the isolated text to the larger questions of the course. You've put the poem through a full process of analysis, but now you need to be able to speak and write about it such that others can understand your evaluations: bring these notes to class, and let the discussion aid you in expressing in words what can be difficult to pin down in the poem.

## ...AND FINALLY:

**Enjoy what you know!** As you develop these skills, you will find that serious reading is also pleasure reading. Why? Because you are now able to *find* what is engaging in the text. You are able to see—to analyze, to critique—what a superficial reader overlooks. You are able to perceive precisely the way texts work: how they organize your attention, how they make their claims on their readers – both historical and actual (i.e. you).