**A general reading guide for an essay or piece of scholarship**

**These are three main questions I ask about any essay/thesis, and they constitute one way to read or write a piece of expository prose. All three are interconnected to some extent, but especially the last two questions (What?/How?). The reason for this may not be immediately evident, but it ultimately suggests that we cannot entirely separate argument from style. How an author persuades us of an idea often depends on the effectiveness of the presentation. Consider the following questions when reading through an essay. You may write down answers to any or all of them as you read along (or after reading an essay). Note that you will probably have to reread the questions below as well as the essay at least once.**

**Three main questions (with sub-questions) to consider when reading an essay:**

**Why? (Why should anyone read this essay?)**

How does the author establish a problem that needs to be solved?

What is the thesis (the solution to that problem)?

Is it clearly stated, repeated multiple times, or offered in successive versions with clarification?

**What? (What’s it about?)**

What areas or subject matter will the author discuss?

Is s/he building on other scholarship or common observations? Does the author relate an awareness of other possible interpretations? (And what does this do for you as a reader—how does it make you sympathize with the author?). If an essay is a conversation with a reader, what conversation are you involved in?

How does a new paragraph move to the discussion of a new topic, and is that “topic” a thesis with a new idea or a new set of information to be shared with the reader? Something else altogether?

Do you read an essay for an eye to the facts that you can glean from it or for the argument that the author makes along the way? Is it easy to keep in mind these two areas, argument and evidence, without conflating them?

**How? (Is it well done?)**

How does the author effect transitions between individual sentences within a paragraph? Can you easily follow the train of thought, and in what ways does an author accommodate the writing to the flow of ideas?

“Signposting” is a term commonly used to describe the explicit or implicit guidance that a writer gives to a reader. There are many different forms of signposting, such as the easily visible “I will argue that…” to the more subtle “One might object that…”. Both indicate to the reader the author’s linear exposition of thought as well as a position that the author wishes to defend or refute. What signposting does the author lay out for you?

Does the author present ideas in clear language, and does a sense of clarity come about through diction, phraseology, or other forms of attention to an imagined reader? Are there points at which the essay seems to fail in this obligation (are certain phrases or passages obscure, unclear, or otherwise unknown to you?). Do you think that the author is at fault if you cannot understand him/her? Alternatively, could you understand the material better after revisiting the essay or with a greater familiarity of the subject matter? Neither of these options is necessarily correct; the author may simply be a poor writer. But before making that claim, you should make sure that you understand what the author is trying to say and if the final product could have been more felicitously executed.

Are there certain terms or phrases that you like or dislike? Why do you have these reactions to them? Make sure to write them out or mark the passages as you read. Are certain terms new to you? If so, do you think that the author possesses a good command of vocabulary or is he/she just showing off a command of obscure diction? If you find a term that you don’t know, ask yourself if a better or simpler term could have been used in its place. Or has the author made precisely the right choice?