READING BOOKS IN COLLEGE:
A SURVIVAL MANUAL

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Please email me with suggestions for additions or revisions.)
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PRINCIPLES OF NOTE-TAKING

1. Notetaking is everything. Within a month, you will have forgotten most of what you have read. This is ok, so long as you write notes recording key ideas and where in the book to find them.

2. Highlighters are no good. You will soon forget why you highlighted a passage. Instead, use separate sheets of paper, or a computer, to jot down key ideas (and their page numbers). When reading, you should engage in a dialogue with the author. Your notes represent your side of the conversation. In short, good reading requires active writing.

3. Skimming might feel like cheating (at first) but it is essential. The trick is to skim smartly. Expert skimming is an acquired skill that requires discipline and practice. Most of us are in this class because we enjoy sitting down with good books. Smart skimming admittedly takes some of the fun out of reading. Still, this method will allow you to cover more terrain and encounter more ideas than would otherwise be possible. This in turn leads to intellectual excitement and growth.

4. Take notes in a way that will later let you distinguish between your thoughts and the author's argument and evidence. For instance, use a star or asterisk to mark your own thoughts. Or place a big "S" or "W" next to each strength or weakness that you record in your notes.

5. You might be tempted to takes notes in the book's margins. This is convenient in the short run, but it creates problems later. It takes longer to review your notes this way, and marginalia requires you to carry heavy stacks of books if you want to review all your notes at once.

HOW TO READ A BOOK

STEP ONE. THE OVERVIEW: Read the back cover and any picture captions. Examine the table of contents to get a sense of the book's **topic** and how the chapters divide that topic. Estimate how much time you will need to finish. Lastly, skim the acknowledgements to learn about the author as a researcher and human being.

STEP TWO: THE BOOKENDS: Read the introduction, the preface (if applicable), and the conclusion. Your main goal here is to find the **thesis**. A thesis is more than just a topic or starting question. A thesis presents an argument or interpretation about that topic. Don't assume that all authors present their theses in one convenient sentence. Sometimes the book's core idea will be scattered in different places. Write down the thesis (or your best guess) in your own words.

STEP THREE: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND METHOD: Skim the footnotes or endnotes to get a sense of the book's **primary sources**. Does the author cite mostly government documents, oral history interviews, legal testimonies, police records, and so on? Sometimes, historians do not give endnotes or footnotes, especially when writing for popular audiences. Even in these cases, try to imagine what kinds of sources the historian used to support the argument. Now that you've examined the intro, conclusion, and notes, you should ask what kind of **historiographic method(s)** the author employs. Is this traditional political history? Social history from the bottom-

up? Cultural history? Does the author refer to any theorist or theoretical concepts? In the intro or notes, the author will likely explain the **historiographic position** of the book. Take notes on this too. Does the author want to contribute to a particular set of existing scholarship? Does the author disagree with other scholars?

STEP FOUR: THE FIRST PAUSE: Stop reading for a moment and reflect on what you've encountered so far. Is the thesis or method surprising to you? Are you inclined to accept the thesis or to be skeptical? Ask yourself why you have that reaction. Assume for a second that the thesis will be persuasive; how then would the book change your understanding of this topic? Keep in mind that these are just tentative reactions. What's important is that you begin to think and write critically about the book's key ideas before reading the body of the book. This step might seem cumbersome, but it will save you time in the long run by helping you identify which parts of the book's body to read carefully and which parts to skim.

STEP FIVE: A FIRST LOOK AT THE CHAPTERS: For each chapter, read the introduction and conclusion and look for the chapter's thesis. Do this for all the chapters. Remember that not every chapter is of equal importance. Ask yourself which chapters seem most crucial for the book's main argument or for your own personal interests. Also ask yourself which chapters seem most important for the broad class themes that the professor wants to emphasize. Make sure you budget enough time for these key chapters.

STEP SIX: INSIDE THE CHAPTERS (AT LAST!): Now you are ready to move efficiently through the detailed evidence that makes up the bulk of the book. Do not, however, read each paragraph word for word. Try to do a **topic-sentence skim**. That is, read the first sentence of each paragraph and decide if that paragraph is worth reading in detail. Some topic sentences allude to key ideas or examples on which the book thesis or chapter thesis really depend. These are the paragraphs that you should read more carefully. Other topic sentences present ideas that seem relatively safe and conventional. In these cases the author is probably laying basic groundwork or piling on added evidence to solidify the argument. These are the paragraphs you can skip over. Just jump to the next topic sentence.

Learning which paragraphs to read carefully and which paragraphs to breeze over is the hardest part of skimming. It takes practice and conscious reflection to get into the habit. Here is one tip: if you choose to read a paragraph carefully but then find that it wasn't all that enlightening, revisit the topic sentence to look for clues that would have told you that this was a safe paragraph to jump over. Another tip: don't get bogged down in notetaking at this stage. You can always use the book's index to return to a topic. Focus your notetaking energy on passages that reveal particularly strong, weak, or confusing points in the author's argument. You already know the author's chapter thesis and overall thesis, so your notes should comment on how effectively the chapter's evidence supports those arguments.

STEP SEVEN: THE SECOND PAUSE:
You've just finished the book. Chances are you're feeling good and are anxious to move on with the rest of your life. Not so fast!!! **The ten or fifteen minutes after reading a book, when everything is fresh in your mind, are often the most important and fruitful minutes in the whole reading process.** Think about the following: Was your first guess at the book's thesis and method accurate? Did the book really prove its thesis? What sections of the book offered the best or the weakest support for the thesis? What sources or questions did the author not consider, and how might more attention to those neglected areas have improved the argument? Compare the author's argument and method to other authors you've read. Do they complement or contradict each other? Do you find one more valuable than another?

No matter how hurried you are, no matter if you haven't gotten through all the chapters, always **save ten or fifteen minutes for this final reflection**. You will likely be repaid with deeper ideas that can help your class participation and papers.