Getting Familiar with Source Materials

> Writing in academia often requires you to read, understand, and refer back to academic source materials like journal articles, books, and more. A lot of these materials are complicated. How can you read them in ways that help you to understand each source?

I.   Summarize

Making a summary of what you read is helpful because it makes sure you understand the idea, and it also helps you to remember what you've read. But it can be hard to summarize a long or complicated source after reading the whole thing. To make this easier, you can:

a. Make a summary of each page while you read.

  o   This is a way to make sure you're alert and are understanding the material as you go. You can't summarize if you've zoned out!

  o   It also leaves you with a complete summary after you're finished reading.

b. After reading, summarize the source as though explaining it to a friend.

  o   Try to keep this to just a few sentences. If you can capture the main point of your source this briefly, you really understand it.

II.   Make Connections

If you have a particular topic of interest that you're researching for, then following your summary, try noting how the source relates to your research topic or other sources.

a. Why did you choose to read and research this source? How does it contribute to your topic of interest?

  o   Evaluate whether the source is useful or not useful. Does it support your arguments or contradict them?

  o   Are the authors reliable? Do they exhibit any clear biases or leave out any important information?

b. How does this source relate to other sources on the same topic?

  o   Do many other authors refer to this source? Do other sources agree or disagree?

  o   Does the source build on other sources? Does it react against them?

III.   Keep a Personal Database

As you encounter sources that you'll want to keep referring to in your studies, even years later, you'll want to keep your own personal records of both content and connections for the sources you read.

Try using a reference management program like Zotero, EndNote, or Mendeley to organize your sources, summaries, and citations for as long as you need them.