

# Dr. T's ~~Helpful Hints~~

## No. 17: Reading Academic Works



**R**eading is perhaps the most fundamental skill needed during college, yet it amazes me how few students actually know how to read a scholarly work effectively. Most students read for “facts,” which encourages memorization. While memorization is important, it is not a substitute for critical thinking. The following list of questions is designed to help you read a (social science) work critically.\* To take notes on a book, write these questions down and answer them in as few words as possible. If you can answer these questions, you will have gone a long way to understanding the book or article.

- **What is the principal question being asked?** Almost all academic works try to answer some question or solve some puzzle. Sometimes this question is stated explicitly. Other times it is not. Some works (particularly books) may have several questions, though one is usually central. Find this question and write it down.
- **What is the author’s answer?** This is the author’s thesis statement. Like the question, it may or may not be stated explicitly. Most social science explanations are fairly simple – X causes Y, or X combined with W under conditions C cause Y. Diagram the argument in this way. Draw a picture with arrows used to show causal connections.
- **What other explanations are offered?** A serious academic will spell out other possible explanations, usually early on in the article or book. Write these rival explanations down.

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\* Critical thinking does not necessarily mean disagreeing with someone’s argument or findings. Instead, it implies bringing a healthy skepticism to a work. It should also be noted here that the hints presented here relate to social science scholarship. I do not intend it for use with readings in the humanities.



- **What is the author's evidence?** Briefly write down what the author uses as evidence. This discussion is usually contained in the bulk of the book or article. This evidence may be quantitative (statistical) or qualitative (e.g., historical story). Ask yourself how convincing this evidence is. What other evidence could have been gathered? What evidence is offered to eliminate or support the rival explanations?
- **Other issues.** When thinking about the author's explanation and evidence, think about the concepts and measurements being used. For example, if the author is talking about the concept of "democracy," how is she defining that concept? How is "democracy" measured? This measure need not be numerical. Determining this is not necessarily an easy task and it takes practice to perfect this skill. I recommend taking a research methodology course (e.g., POL S 205) to learn more about these skills.

*A note on descriptive research.* Some social science research, mostly historical, proclaims not to offer explanations of social events. However, by selecting certain facts to present in discussing an event, descriptive researchers implicitly offer an explanation. These explanations are often more difficult to tease out, but they are still there.

LEGAL DISCLAIMER: "Dr. T's Helpful Hints" are only suggested practices and do not guarantee academic success. You are responsible for making the choices that determine how well you do in school. Choose wisely.