

Morality and Medicine: Active Reading Assignment

Submit your marks/notes before class on 9/8/20; Be sure to include your name somewhere!

What is active reading?

Sometimes reading can be a very passive activity, simply a matter of taking in information without further critical engagement. Active reading is a way of reading texts that calls on the reader to involve themselves in a text more closely, seeking to follow the flow of prose and reflect on it in real time.

A great way to cultivate this style of reading is to develop a habit of recording markings and notes on a paper (or separate note page) while you read it. Developing different symbols (underlining, bracketing, circling, question marks, stars, etc.) and techniques (marginal comments, short summaries, basic reactions, etc.) for highlighting portions of a text that stand out to you will help you to read more critically and in a manner that is attentive to the variations in an author's prose.

What should you look for and mark in particular?

Thesis statements: these are the main claims that the author intends to argue for in a paper. An especially straightforward author may begin a thesis statement with a phrase like, "In this paper, I will argue that..." or, "This paper will demonstrate that..." or something of that nature. Other authors are less clear and it may take a little hunting to figure out what their main thesis is. In any case, you should expect it to show up early on and try to keep it in mind as the main thread underlying what follows.

Supporting arguments: these are the different chains of reasoning that an author puts forward to help convince their reader of the thesis statement, or to convince them of a sub-claim (a "premise") that serves as a stepping-stone to accepting the thesis.

Typically the overarching argument of the paper will consist of several sub-claims, which, when accepted, are meant to lead the reader to accept the main thesis of the paper. Each sub-claim may have its own supporting argument and evidence intended to convince the reader of its truth.

An especially clear author will begin each section by stating what sub-claim they intend to argue for in that section, they will then present evidence and arguments meant to back up that sub-claim (ideally writing something like, "one reason to believe this is that..."), and will conclude in favor of that sub-claim (ideally signaling this with phrases like, "thus...", "therefore...", etc).

Points of confusion/disagreement: authors are often not as clear or flawless as we would like. It can be very helpful to keep track of your reactions to a paper in real time. For example, if a passage is so laden with jargon, or seemingly irrelevant to the overall point that you can't follow it, putting a question mark next to the section can flag it for a second reading/later attempt at clarification. Special notation (say, a star) for passages where you think a major assumption or crucial step in the author's reasoning takes place will help you return to these important sections in the future, isolating those points of the paper that call for the most scrutiny.