

On Reading

Reading is an active process. It is central to this course.

In 1549, in the first Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer introduced this collect:

Blessed Lord,
who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning;
grant us that we may in such wise hear them,
read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them;
that by patience and comfort of thy holy word,
we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which thou hast given us in our savior Jesus Christ.

The method of study outlined by in the prayer's main clause provides an excellent guide to reading for this class.

that we may in such wise – Know why you read. Attend to the “wise” or “way” by which you interpret what you read. Why has the text been assigned? What do you want to get from it? Be aware of your ideas about the text and its subject and how they may be shaping your understanding of the text's message.

hear – Listen to the sound of the words. Many of the primary texts you read, especially those composed before the eighteenth century, were written to be read aloud with other people. Reading was not a solitary practice. It invited conversation and created community. Texts often contained rhyme, repetition, and rhythm so that they would sound pleasant and be memorable. Even some translations preserve these effects.

read – Read. Really read! Reading is an essential part of the process, but only one part of the process.

Beware of how the meaning of words depends on their context and of how the meaning of words at the time they were written may be different that it is today. “Comfort” in this prayer is such a word. How does the “comfort of thy holy word” help one “hold fast” to the hope of everlasting life? While this might make sense in contemporary English, you may also sense that “comfort” was a more powerful concept for Cranmer than it is for us. In the sixteenth century, “comfort” did not mean pleasure or consolation. It meant encouragement or aid. The “fort” in comfort evoked “fortification” and “fortress.” The meaning of some words will not be what suspect. You may need to consult a dictionary, even the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to uncover the whole story.

mark – Pay attention. Take notes. By “mark,” Cranmer probably meant “take note of,” as in, “Mark my words!” Certainly, you should not read only with your eyes but also with your brain. Yet, I believe it is also important to mark your own copy of texts.

Some suggestions:

- Use a pencil so you can correct your annotations as your understanding of the text improves.
- Underline key terms and important passages. Do not underline everything. That is not useful.
- Circle words you do not understand so that you can come back to them or ask about them in class.
- Outline the argument in the margin as you read. This will help you see the flow of the argument and identify key passages quickly during class discussion or when you are writing.
- Summarize major points in a few words of your own in the margins.
- Write down questions the readings raise.
- Jot down a summary of the piece and your own reflection on it in your notes.

learn – Quiz yourself on what the text is saying. Internalize it. Reading and marking are but the beginning of study. Answer any study questions provided in the book or by the instructor. Form questions of your own and answer them.

inwardly digest – Ponder. Once you have learned what the text says, there is still another step. Consider the text. Reflect on it. How does it relate to what you have read before? What does it prompt you to read next? What is the significance of this text? What does the text say that is important for the history of religion? For you personally?

Hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest your readings to gain what this class has to offer.