

WORKING THROUGH DIFFICULT TEXTS

ENGL 108 / SEC. H & I / SUMMER LEAP 2009 / OLDHAM & RUBASKY / CHANG & LEE

WEEK

2

One of the hardest lessons in learning, reading, studying, writing, and overcoming academic (or any) challenges is figuring out how to face and working through difficult tasks. Part of any difficulty is unfamiliarity, scale, scope, problem solving, procrastination, and effort. These things can make difficult tasks—like reading a challenging text—boring, frustrating, seemingly impossible, irrelevant, or just plain busy work. However, part of navigating your academic life is metacognitively thinking, strategizing, and practicing how to tackle difficult tasks.

Take the following scenario, for example:

You get back to your dorm after a long day of class and practice and you are *tired*. You pull out the syllabus for your Intro to Art History class and you see that you have 30 pages to read. No big deal, you think to yourself. I can get this done in an hour. You find the course pack, turn to the readings, and get started. And then you start to panic. You have only read one paragraph of the reading and you didn't understand a thing! The writer uses phrases like "postmodern aesthetic" and "dominant theoretical paradigm." Not only is the language really dense, it took you ten minutes time to not understand it. At this rate you will be up until 3 AM trying to get through it. First you feel hopeless, then you start to feel angry. Then you say, "forget it, I'm going to bed!"

What this scene demonstrates are the ways that difficult tasks can be overwhelming for the already-exhausted college student. You have been working so hard to get things done, and then you are faced with a highly difficult reading that seems to make no sense whatsoever. Often we respond to feeling overwhelmed by shutting down and giving up. And, while giving up and going to bed is something we all do at one time or another, it is not something that helps you learn what you need to learn, maintain your GPA, get into your intended major, or make the Dean's List. The reality of college work is that once you start to get behind, it is really hard to catch up.

We want to help you tackle what seems to be an impossible task by offering strategies by which you can get something out of the reading. It is a big misconception that your professors and instructors expect you to understand everything you read. Perhaps some teachers do have these very high expectations, but most understand that as readers, you have to get what you can out of an essay. In fact, they will be thrilled if you come to class able to demonstrate some understanding of what you have been asked to read. Ultimately it is better to understand some of the reading than to have read none of it.

Here are some strategies for coping with difficult readings:

- Use your annotation skills to the best of your ability; close read passages to help you focus
- Focus on understanding one or two key concepts—you don't have to try to understand it all
- Take notes in which you summarize the points you do understand
- Do some general, contextualizing research (see what other people are saying about the material)
- Use the class discussion and lecture to help create a focus for your reading (what are the themes that have been discussed, etc.)
- If necessary, skim. Pay attention to section headings, beginning and concluding sentences, and bolded or italicized texts