

WAYS OF READING

While not representing a strict continuum or hierarchy, Ways of Reading describes *how* we read depending on our purpose. Which one we use—that is, *how* we read—depends on *why* we are reading.

Name	Description
Surface Reading	<i>Surface reading</i> is like rock-skipping at a lake: the reader touches down periodically but never goes below the surface to seek a deeper or even more complete understanding of the text. When finished, the reader can tell someone what the subject of the text is but not what it <i>means</i> .
Close Reading	<i>Close reading</i> is like jumping in and swimming in the water. You read all the words and make a serious effort to understand the text, paying attention to organization and punctuation as they affect meaning. When finished, the reader can identify the subject of the text and what it means, but not how the author created the text or its effect on the reader.
Critical Reading	<i>Critical reading</i> means you are not just swimming in the water but studying it; you are a diver who has come to examine the ecosystem to better understand how it works and how the elements relate to each other. Critical readers examine not just what the writer says but <i>how</i> the writer says it; they look also at what the writer does <i>not</i> say but may imply through imagery, language, or organizational patterns. Critical readers examine the narrators' reliability, arguments' effectiveness, authors' intentions, and stylistic devices. When finished, the reader knows the subject and meaning of the text, the author's purpose, and how the author achieved that purpose.
Reflective Reading	<i>Reflective reading</i> is reading to think. Such reading involves some elements of both close and critical reading; yet it is different, for the reflective reader <i>uses</i> reading to think; thus the text is itself a tool. We do such reading when conducting research; it is akin to grazing in many pastures, digesting what we find there to see if it relates to or brings clarity to our subject of inquiry. It is also how one might read a sacred, literary, or philosophical text from which one sought insight and inspiration. When finished, the reader has some new insight—into themselves, the world, or a subject of serious interest—that will contribute to their academic research or personal inquiry.
Concentric Reading	<i>Concentric reading</i> involves reading across other texts, moving out from an idea and making associations, connections to and through other texts. Carol Ann Tomlinson calls this “orbital reading.” Thus one might read a literary or historical text which leads to some other idea that can only be explored in a second text; there one finds ideas that lead the reader to still a third text, say one about the elements of effective argument. Many innovative thinkers read this way, making connections within their own and across other fields of study as one text suggests a new connection that the next text confirms and extends. When finished, the reader sees patterns and connections between texts, authors, disciplines, ideas, or eras.
Dynamic Reading	<i>Dynamic reading</i> is what Judith Langer calls “envisionment building.” Langer writes that “understandings grow and change and spiral and become transmuted. And ideas we have at one point in time may be gone in another. We don't merely add information. I use the term envisionment to refer to the world of understanding we have at one point in time, when we are reading, writing, or thinking.... Envisionments are always in a state of change, as new ideas, information or experiences come to mind—even after you have completed the overt literary experience.” (CELA <i>English Update</i> Spring 2003) When finished, readers understand that they are <i>not</i> finished, that their understanding of the text and its subject continues to change depending on their purpose, experience, and knowledge. One enters into a conversation with and through the text that is ongoing so long as the reader maintains a relationship with the text and its subject.

Here are some other ways to think about how we read. The top row represents readings that remain—in one respect or another—on the surface level; the deliberate and effective use of active reading techniques and strategies allows readers to “build envisionments” as Langer calls them, of greater sophistication.

Surface	Denotative	Literal	Concrete	Terminal
Deep	Connotative	Figurative	Abstract	Generative