

Graduate Reading Strategies

By Dr. Stephen Marshall

I was taught that sophisticated reading was the product of a two level interpretive method. Below are the questions I was taught to put to each text that I read. This is the method that I continue to use in my own work.

Level I: Exegesis (Basic and what I expect of an A undergraduate student and any competent 1st semester graduate student)

- 1) What is the argument of the text?
- 2) What claims are made by each chapter and how do these claims develop or support the text's argument?
- 3) What evidence does the author provide as support for their claims and for the text's overall argument?
- 4) Is this evidence compelling?
- 5) What assumptions are presupposed by an author and what is the intellectual, political, moral, and aesthetic status of these assumptions?

Level II (Interpretive/Evaluative and what I expect of my graduate students)

- 1) Historical- what is the historical context of the work and how does the text reflect this context?
- 2) Normative- what conceptions of nature, morality, beauty, order inform the text and what is the intellectual status of these conceptions?
- 3) Existential- what conception of the human informs a work, i.e. how does a work conceptualize what it means to be a human being?
- 4) Political- How does a work engage the politics of its time? How does it engage ours?