

Reading / Key Concepts

Reading, like the book, is something we sometimes take for granted. Most of us spend large amounts of time reading text—from social media to formal documents—throughout the day. But we don't usually take time to consider how reading works.

So in this video, I'll present a few important ideas about reading as we understand it today. These ideas serve as a kind of snapshot of reading theory. I hope these ideas also inspire you to look in more detail at the work of some of the scholars and researchers I will reference.

Reading is complex

As any child or parent knows, learning to read text is a process. It takes practice and effort. Unlike speaking or playing, reading does not come naturally to humans. Maryanne Wolfe is a professor of child psychology who studies learning and child development. She specializes in dyslexia and other neurological issues that can disrupt the brain's ability to process alphabetic text. If you are interested in the science of reading and how the brain learns to process texts, her book *Proust and the Squid* is an excellent place to start.

"We were never born to read. Human beings invented reading only a few thousand years ago. And with this invention, we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think, which altered the intellectual evolution of our species. Reading is one of the single most remarkable inventions in human history; the ability to record history is one of its consequences." — Maryanne Wolfe, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, p. 3.

If you are interested in the cognitive science part of reading, another point of reference is the work of Stanislas Dehaene, a French scientist who studies how the human brain processes letters and numbers.

Reading is active

It might seem like reading is a matter of decoding text on the page (or screen), but the truth is that reading is an active process of creating meaning. Take a famous text, for example:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them.

A reader who has read Shakespeare before will bring more to this text than one who has not. An actor who has played the part of Hamlet will experience the text differently from a scholar who is writing a critical analysis of the play. We bring as much to the text as we take out of it—reading is a process of creating meaning, in the interplay between the reader and the text.

Similarly, you might imagine that when you read a text, your eyes follow along the lines from left to right, in an orderly procession. In fact, our eyes jump around the page or screen rapidly, and our brains do a lot of work to fill in the gaps. We often see on the page what we think should be there—which is one reason that proofreading is harder than it looks.

You have probably seen images of eye-tracking “heat maps” on web pages. These show the areas where readers tend to focus most visual attention. In the West, most readers tend to focus most on the top and left edges of a page, often creating a kind of F-shaped pattern with their eyes as they scan pages.

<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/>

Reading is social

Even though we view reading as a solitary activity, it is profoundly social. We make sense of stories and information based on what we have experienced in our own lives and what we have been taught in the past.

One recent development in reading is the development of online reading groups and sites like Goodreads, which are designed to allow readers to connect to other readers to share opinions and feedback on what they read. Fan Fiction, where readers literally rewrite their favorite stories, are another example of the growth of social modes of reading.

Reading changes

The idea that reading changes over time is probably almost self-evident to us today because we are experiencing this profound shift from print to digital reading. As Nicholas Carr pointed out, we may be moving away from a kind of deep-focus approach to reading and toward some new kind of skimming and scanning. And as Steven Johnson argues, we are also more readily able to connect what we are reading to other texts and other sources by means of hypertext links and other technologies that create a web of ideas in place of a static text.

The idea of multimodal literacy is the idea that reading today encompasses not just words but also images and graphics. Gunther Kress is one of the scholars who has developed a body of work around the idea of multimodal reading and literacy and the importance of being able to read visual texts as well as written.

The printed book was the necessary precondition for the spread of literacy. Today, the internet shapes how and what we read and changes our focus. How we understand what it means to be literate will need to adapt as well.

I hope this snapshot of key concepts in reading theory prompts some ideas that you might want to explore further in your work in Unit 2. You can find some additional topic ideas and links on the Week 7 page of our course website.