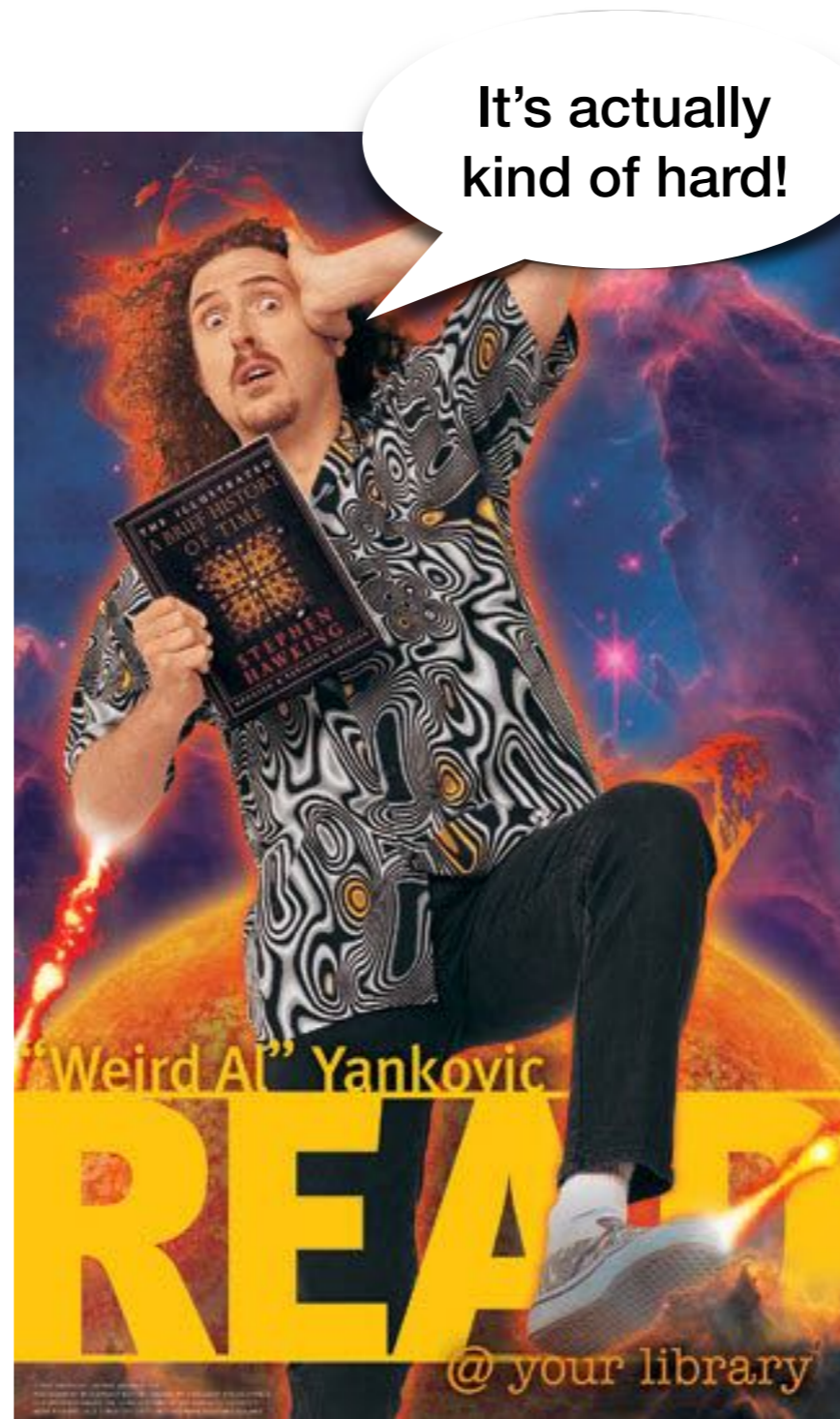


Prof. Posner's Slides on How to Read a Book

October 16, 2017

How to read a book



Getting Ready

Silence? Café noise?

- Give yourself time and space.
- Breathe and clear your head.
- Accessorize!



“Gutting” a book (or article)

Step one: Survey

Look carefully at the **front and back covers** and the **table of contents**. Skim the **bibliography**. Look at **subheadings**.

Contents

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“Gutting” a book (or article)

Step two: Intro & conclusion

Read the introduction and conclusion. Look for **major themes**, not details. Find the **thesis statement**.

Preface

I grew up in a family where history sat at the dinner table. All his life, my father engaged in a number of parallel professional activities, none of which alone defined him, but most of which were steeped in his love of history. I was in my teens when he started a regular program on Haitian television that explored little-known details of the history of the country. That program rarely surprised me: the stories my dad told his audience were not different from those he told at home. I had catalogued some of them on the yellowed cards that embodied a massive biographical dictionary of Haitian history my father never finished. Later, in the class he taught in world history in my high school, I worked harder than my classmates to earn a passing grade. But his lectures, good as they were, never matched what I learned at home on Sundays.

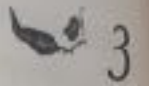
Sunday afternoon was when my father's brother, my uncle Hénock, came to visit. He was one of the few people I knew who actually earned a living from knowing history. He was nominally the director of the National Archives, but writing was his true passion and he published historical research too fast for most readers to keep up with—in books, journals, and newspapers, at times his preferred medium. On Sundays, he tested his ideas on

“Gutting” a book (or article)

Step three: Scan inside

For each chapter, read the **first and last few paragraphs**. Skim the rest. What is each chapter about?

The
Haitian
Revolution
as a
Non-event



The young woman stood up in the middle of my lecture. “Mr. Trouillot, you make us read all those white scholars. What can they know about slavery? Where were they when we were jumping off the boats? When we chose death over misery and killed our own children to spare them from a life of rape?”

I was scared and she was wrong. She was not reading white authors only and she never jumped from a slave ship. I was dumbfounded and she was angry; but how does one reason with anger? I was on my way to a Ph.D., and my teaching this course was barely a stopover, a way of paying the dues of guilt in this lily-white institution. She had taken my class as a mental break on her way to med school, or Harvard law, or some lily-white corporation.

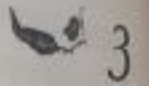
I had entitled the course “The Black Experience in the Americas.” I should have known better: it attracted the few black students around—plus a few courageous whites—and they were all expecting too much, much more than I could deliver. They wanted a life that no narrative could provide, even the best fiction. They wanted a life that only they could build right now, right here in the United States—except that they did not know this: they were too close to the unfolding story. Yet already I could see in their eyes that part of my lesson registered. I wanted them to know that slavery did not happen

“Gutting” a book (or article)

Step four: Focus

Now that you know what the book's about, **focus on the parts that are relevant to your research question.** Read those more carefully.

The
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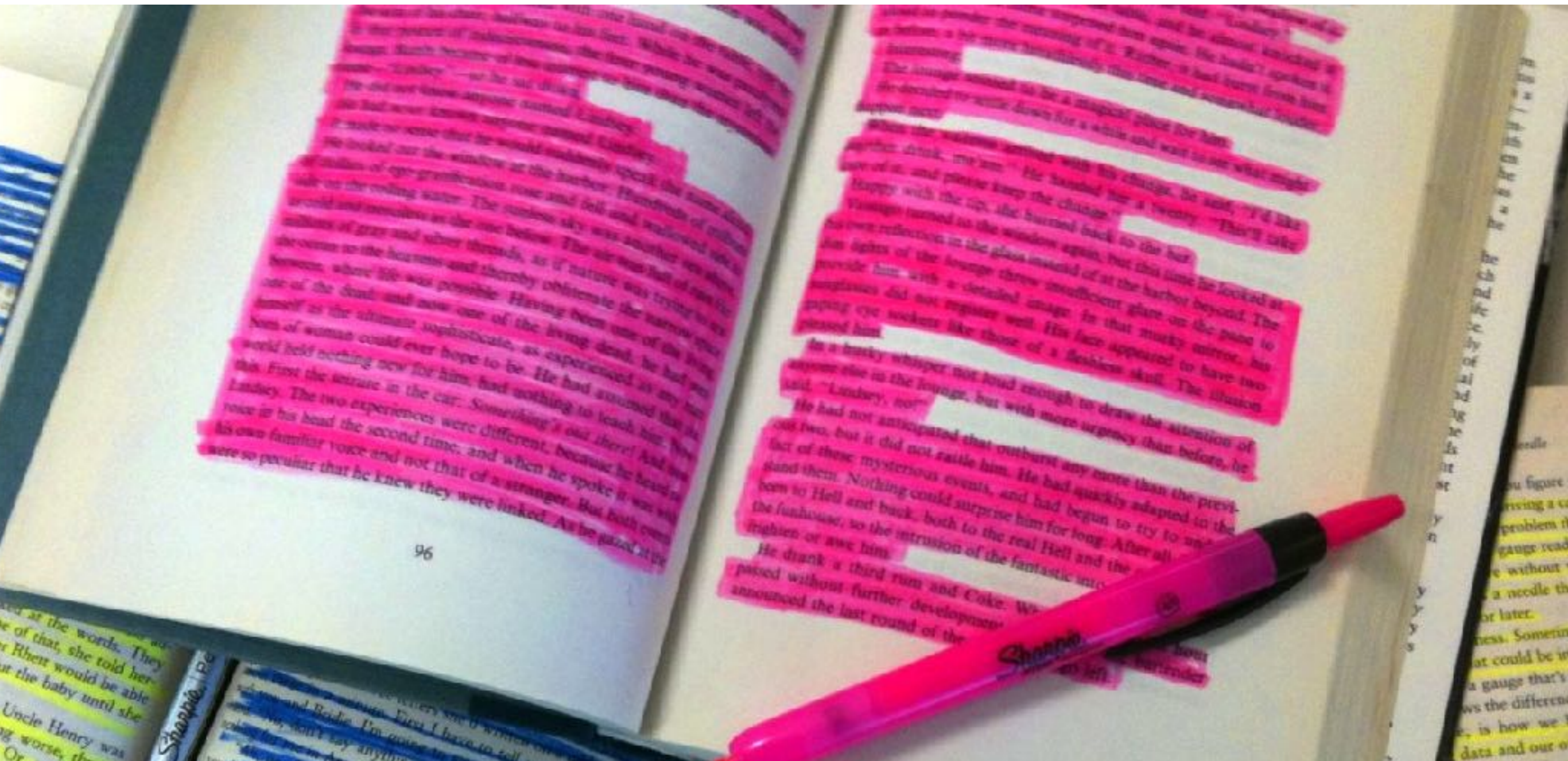
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You'll do better if you...

... read for the argument instead of getting hung up on details.



You'll do better if you...

... keep moving rather than getting stuck on a word or passage you don't understand.



You'll do better if you...

... remember that reading is *part* of understanding a text. Discussion and conversation are key, too.



You'll do better if you...

... take a walk. Sometimes giving your mind room to roam is more effective than staring in frustration at a text.

