

## Nonfiction Reading Strategies: Structures and Strategies

When you are reading nonfiction, it is helpful to pay attention to the following **structures**. As you read, note these structures so that you can actively attack the passage to understand the main idea, assertions made, premises presented, and arguments discussed.

1. **Repetition:** underline, circle, or highlight words, ideas, and images repeated throughout the passage. You will begin to see patterns, and more than likely, you will pinpoint **the main idea(s)**.
  
2. **Punctuation:**
  - a. Italics—determine **why** these are being used (emphasis, title, using a word as a word?)
  - b. Parentheses—important for determining **author's attitude and tone**
  - c. Question marks—rhetorical questions, dialogue, or actual questions being posed by the author
  - d. Dashes—treat these similar to parentheses, but also note that info inside the dashes was considered important enough to interrupt the original idea
  - e. Quotation marks—determine **why** these are being used (direct quotation, emphasis, irony, title?)
  - f. Exclamation point—in a fiction excerpt, these are related to **character or tone**; in a nonfiction excerpt, these are relevant to **author's attitude or tone**
  - g. Colons: what comes after the colon finishes what comes before it (a list or a premise usually)
  - h. Semicolons: join 2 equal and related ideas/clauses
  - i. Commas—determine **how** these are being used
    - i. to separate items in a series
    - ii. to enclose a parenthetical element
    - iii. to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause
    - iv. to separate adjectives
    - v. to separate an introductory element from the main clause or idea
    - vi. to join 2 parallel elements/clauses with a coordinating conjunction (FANBOY)
  
3. **Numbers:** dates, statistics, facts, historical information
  
4. **Number and length of paragraphs:** important to know **why** the author is switching paragraphs
  
5. **Diction:** pay attention to connotation and emotional content of words. In this way, you can determine how the author feels about the subject.

### Strategies

- A. After reading EACH paragraph, say or write to the side the **main idea or topic** of the paragraph.
- B. Ask yourself, “**Why** did the author switch to a new paragraph? Is there a new idea, a new approach, an example, etc.?”
- C. Write on, circle, highlight, or otherwise **note information** so that you can easily retrieve facts and information when you need them.
- D. Practice the skill of **translation**. If the word “complicated” is used, for example, in the passage or text, it can be translated to “complex,” “multi-faceted,” or another similar word.
- E. Practice the skill of **inverse thinking**: If the passage or text says, for example, the following statement, “Some critics dismissed the movie as insignificant,” then say the inverse of that statement: Other critics did not dismiss the movie.
- F. Discipline yourself to use the **WHAT HOW HOW** strategy:  
**WHAT** does the author/narrator/character/text say?  
**HOW** does he/she feel about it (enthusiastic, objective, neutral, ambivalent—tone)?  
**HOW** does the writer/creator of the piece convey the what and the how—passage organization such as lists, hypotheticals, anecdotes, narrative elements, historical allusion.