

How to Read Theological Texts

Reading theology is VERY different than reading a novel or fictional story, or even reading typical textbooks. Everything written has a purpose and is not decorative. The reader cannot “tune out” for a few paragraphs and then pick it back up without losing information.

Skimming does not work well when reading theology. This is because, unlike textbooks, theological writing will not bold important terms or put definitions into boxes in the page margins. You—the reader—have to discern what is important and why. Looking at the provided headings and subheadings is, however, always a good place to start in understanding what the writer thinks is important.

Here are some tips for reading theological writing:

- Make sure that you have full attention on the text—no distractions—and that you can read without interruption for the full section of the text assigned.
- Have ready a good dictionary—either book or online—to look up words that are not familiar. Write down the word and definition in notes if the word comes up several times.
- Take notes as you read, by hand, on a separate sheet of paper. Typing notes is ok, but less effective than writing by hand. Also, writing in the margins of the book is even less helpful for retention than typing notes.

Write your notes in a formal outline style:

- I. Roman numerals for largest headings
 - a. Small subsections
 - i. Specific examples or points

Doing it in this way helps you see what is most important and then what is less important, or an example. It also helps you see the connection between multiple points, and therefore makes clearer the argument the author is making.

- Always ask: what argument is the author making, or what is the main point of a certain discussion? Why is *x* being included here and how does it relate to what I just read before it?
- Before deciding whether or not you “agree” or “disagree” with the author, make sure you understand the argument. Some writers will summarize positions or other people’s writings that are not their own. These may be the *opposite* of what the author him or herself actually is arguing, so make sure to stay vigilant in how an argument is being constructed.
- Some people have incorrectly assumed that engaging a text in writing necessitates disagreeing or finding fault with a reading. This is not the case. You may reasonably disagree or agree, but make sure to explain clearly *why*. Refusing to engage an argument is unacceptable.