THE THREE-PASS APPROACH: AN OVERVIEW

The Three-Pass Approach will enable you to evaluate the credibility of articles, books, and online sources so that you will be able to decide whether or not to use them in your essays. At first, the method will seem as if it involves a lot of work, and maybe you will think initially that it is not worth your time. Keep in mind, though, that with practice, the first two steps quickly become collapsed into one, and that any new method may seem cumbersome at first but eventually becomes easy to use. Here, then, is an overview of the three-pass approach:

1. **The First Pass—Reflection and Quick Overview**
   During the first pass, the reader reflects on the subject and context of the issue or problem being addressed, evaluates the qualifications and motives of the author, and examines the reading for additional clues, such as the title, publication information, and easily discernible strategies of organization.

2. **The Second Pass—Reading for Meaning and Structure**
   During the second pass, the reader reads the text for meaning to determine what it is saying. To aid understanding, the reader uses structural clues within the text and facilitates his or her understanding by summarizing main points.

3. **The Third Pass—Interacting with the Text**
   During the third pass, the reader interacts with the text, actively engaging in a critical dialogue with it in order to determine how much of it to accept. Such interaction involves distinguishing between fact and opinion, evaluating the type of evidence cited, deciding whether the writer is aware of the complexity of the topic, and paying close attention to how language is being used to shape the reader's perspective.

College Argument
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A DETAILED LOOK AT THE THREE-PASS APPROACH
THE FIRST PASS—REFLECTION AND QUICK OVERVIEW

The first pass over a published work involves assessing what you already know about the subject matter, the context, and the author and then examining the easily detectable surface clues that the work provides. Before you begin reading a published work, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do I know about the subject matter of this work? Have I been brought up to have an opinion on this topic? Have I heard discussions on this topic or read anything about it? Is there a controversy associated with this topic?

2. What is important to understand about this topic or issue? Is there some action or policy associated with it? Was it written in response to another piece of writing? For whom is it being written? Do I know anything about any particular groups associated with this issue?

3. What do I know about the author? Does the author have a title or position that would indicate his or her qualifications or a particular agenda? Can I speculate on what the motive of the author might be?

THE SECOND PASS—READNG FOR MEANING AND STRUCTURE

During the second pass, you should read the material through reasonably quickly and write a summary of it so that you can easily refer back to it without having to reread it. Use the summary to encapsulate its overall point, as well as to record component supporting points and make the summary sufficiently complete so that even a reader who has not read the article will be able to understand what it is about. Also be sure to write down all information you would need in order to be able to locate the article again if you wish to use it—that is, for an article, include the title, the author, the title of the journal, issue number, pages, and date; for a book, include the author, title, and publication information, such as publisher, place of publication, and date.

In reading a text for meaning, it is a good idea to focus attention on its purpose and structure—that is,

Is it a response to another point of view? Can you situate it in a conversation?

Is there a controversy associated with it?

Does the article or book compare and contrast two or more ideas or recommenda-
dations?

Does it make a point about cause and effect?

Does it pose a question and then answer it?

Does it trace the history of something, structuring its information chronologi-
cally?

Is it developed through the use of many examples?

During the second pass, you will understand the text more easily if you think about how it has been organized, noting how different facets of the topic relate to the author's main point. Look also for signals in the text that indicate a shift of some sort is about to occur, noting how new content is introduced—subheadings are good indicators of this, but sometimes the author uses transitional sentences.

One point to note about the second pass is that after a quick read, you may decide that the work is not worth reading after all. Remember that there has been a lot written that may not be worth your time. Understanding the meaning of a text through a relatively quick appraisal can thus prevent you from expending unnecessary effort.
THE THIRD PASS—INTERACTING WITH THE TEXT

Once you understand the meaning and structure of the text, now is the time to take charge of your reading, which means reading critically with a questioning attitude toward your material and interacting with it as much as possible. Now is the time for you to enter the conversation, not accepting what you read unless the evidence is convincing. Keep in mind what you have learned about the author's agenda or qualifications for writing this particular article or book (or publishing it online), and use that information to formulate critical questions as you read. Following is a detailed discussion of the third pass:

1. Is the argument consistent with what you believe is true or possible about the world and about human behavior?

Your View of the World and Your Belief About Human Nature

In order for an argument to convince a reader, it must be consistent with what the reader believes is true and possible in the world and with his or her concept of human nature. Our view of the world and our beliefs and ideas about humanity serve as a kind of filter through which we can assess the quality of the information we receive, and the more we experience and read, the more we adjust our world view to accommodate new information. We believe, for example, that it is possible to fly from California to New York in about five hours, so that if a friend left my home in L.A. at 2:00 p.m. and then called me at 8:00 p.m., claiming that he was in New York, I would probably believe him (unless I suspected that he was playing some sort of joke or had a reputation for lying, etc.). But if my friend left my home in L.A. at 2:00 p.m. and then called me at 2:30 p.m., claiming to be in New York, I would be unlikely to believe him, even if he claimed that he had been whisked there in a new form of airplane.

Similarly, our concept of human nature—that is, what we believe human beings are likely to do or are capable of doing—is another source by which we evaluate what we read. To cite an obvious example of how one's world view and concept of human nature contribute to the credibility of an idea, imagine the difficulty you would have in convincing a local school board that a night watchman is needed to prevent aliens from landing on the school football field at night, since most people do not believe that aliens constitute much of a problem on a nightly basis (in fact, only some people think that aliens exist at all). On the other hand, it would be less difficult to convince the school board that a night watchman is necessary to prevent thieves from stealing expensive computer equipment from the science lab. Our world view tells us that there are, indeed, such things as thieves, and our concept of human nature tells us that, unfortunately, some human beings will avail themselves of the opportunity to steal, unless reasonable precautions are taken.

2. Is the argument supported with appropriate and believable sub-points, examples, and facts?

Distinguishing Fact From Opinion

Reading a text interactively means being on the alert for statements that may appear to be facts but are actually opinions presented as if they were facts. An effective way to detect the difference, though, is to notice whether or not the main points are supported with specific, appropriate details and sub-points or consist simply of observations that the author thinks are true. Keep in mind that unless a writer is an acknowledged authority, you really have no reason to accept his or her point of view, and that even an expert is obliged to provide supporting evidence.