Understanding Difficult Material

Each piece of writing, be it paragraph, chapter, or entire work, is like a puzzle waiting to be unraveled. Some writings, like some puzzles, are relatively easy to solve because the meaning doesn’t go very deep. Anyone with basic reading skills can breeze through most newspapers, light fiction, and basic textbooks.

But other readings, like other puzzles, are more challenging—on the level of chess as compared with checkers. They may use complicated sentence patterns, or have difficult symbolic and figurative language, or deal with complex or abstract ideas, or use words that seem strange and unfamiliar. Whatever the sources of difficulty, if the material is worth the trouble, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you have mastered the challenge.

Below is a breakdown of some sources of difficulty in reading and some possible strategies for overcoming each one. The assumption is that once you figure out what is causing the problem, you can then work at overcoming it. A proper frame of mind is perhaps as important as anything else.

*To sum up, the key steps that may help you when reading difficult material are:*

1. Get into a "I-can-do-it" frame of mind.
2. Figure out what is causing the hang-up.
3. Try out some strategies for overcoming the problem.

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2. Try to break the long sentence down into parts.  
3. Put the thought of the sentence into your own words.  
4. Look for connecting words like “however,” “but,” and “therefore;” these act as sign posts to meaning. |
| | B. Unfamiliar words that are important for understanding | 1. Guess at meaning on the basis of context (the sentence or sentences surrounding the word) or familiar elements of the word (prefix, suffix)  
2. If necessary, look up the word in a dictionary. |
| | C. Use of allusions, figurative language, symbols, etc. | 1. Look up the allusion (reference to historical or literary events, characters, etc.) if it is unfamiliar to you and it is important.  
2. Figures (metaphors, similes) and symbols: Try to figure out why the author is using it—why is s/he making that particular comparison? |
| | D. Lack of examples to clarify the discussion. | Try to relate the author’s generalizations to examples from your own knowledge. |
| II. YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT OR AUTHOR | A. Insufficient background. The author is presuming knowledge that you don’t have. | If background information is needed, look at some survey books on the subject. Here is a place where skimming and scanning would help. |
| | B. Insufficient knowledge about the author (sometimes needed to understand what s/he is saying or why). | If s/he is a well-known author, you might look at some introductory books about his/her ideas. |
| III. COMPLEX IDEAS | A. Argument difficult to follow because of its complexity. | 1. Skim the entire section to get an overview before reading carefully.  
2. Be sure you understand one part before going on to the next. Re-read each paragraph until you can put the main idea into your own words.  
3. Ask whether each part follows logically from the previous ones. |
| | B. Abstract ideas that are not easily related to anything concrete (as in philosophy, religion, etc.) | This problem has no easy solution. If you have trouble with abstract ideas, try your best to relate them to something concrete. It also might help to look for weaknesses in the author’s ideas—try to think of other ideas that might have as much validity as his hers for explaining or describing what his hers are. |

Finally, here is one more strategy to keep in mind. When you encounter a difficult paragraph, try to figure out how each sentence is functioning in relation to the rest of the paragraph. Sentences generally are of two main kinds:

1) Statements of General Ideas. Topic sentences often fall into this category. A topic sentence functions much like the title of a chapter or book—to let you know what the paragraph is about, and

2) Statements of Specifics. Such sentences often give examples or illustrations to support the general ideas expressed by the topic sentence or other generalizations.

*Ask yourself:* Which sentences are generalizations and which are more specific? How is the author using each one in the paragraph? Can I put the main idea of the paragraph into my own words?