

Reading and Writing as Mindful Practices

“Some people, especially the very young, are good at noticing things that the rest of us don’t see or have ceased to notice. Growing up, we all become increasingly desensitized to the world around us; we tend to forget the specific things that get us to feel and think in particular ways.” (Rosenwasser and Stephen 15)

Listening. We take the act for granted, but what do you *do* when you read or listen to a text, another person speaking to you, or something on your personal computer? What is happening in your head as you listen to someone else say something to you? What is happening in your mind as you read these words? Are you fully and undividedly listening to the words on this page as you read them in your head? Chances are, if you are like almost everyone else on the planet, your attention is divided to some degree. You may be reading these words, but you are also thinking of other things.

“...we aren’t the victims of declining intelligence, but of habit. That is, as we organize our lives so that we can function more efficiently, we condition ourselves to see in more predictable ways and to tune out things that are not immediately relevant to our daily needs.” (Rosenwasser and Stephen 15-16)

Have you ever read a page or even a chapter from something, finished reading or paused, then realized that you don’t know much of what you had just read? Your mind was multitasking as you were reading. This multitasking of the mind actually keeps you from reading academic and dense texts carefully and critically, even to the point of not really knowing what you just read.

“Moving along the roadway in cars, we periodically realize that miles have gone by while we were driving on automatic pilot, attending barely at all to the road or the car or the landscape. Arguably, even when we try to focus on something that we want to consider, the habit of not really attending to things stays with us.” (Rosenwasser and Stephen 16)

If you are like most people, there are other voices in your head as you read a book or this page – or do anything in your daily life, really. These voices, we might say, are an ongoing, running monologue to yourself about anything and everything, your own voice speaking to you in your mind as read these words, telling you that you are hungry, or that you should have worn that green shirt today, or that you don’t really understand the point of this class, or that you’re anxious about a job or dating prospect, etc. This is normal. Everyone’s mind does it. In fact, one might say it is how our minds work, but they don’t always work this way. Occasionally, our minds are silent for a moment. In that moment, we aren’t thinking of anything. There is no monologue. When this happens, we are the most aware and alert to things around us, including words.

Many have found ways to silence the monologue intentionally so that a deeper awareness of what is happening in one’s life, such as reading a text, can occur, a deeper awareness of what these words mean and don’t mean, what they could mean, and what might be underneath them, assumed by the writer, tacit or implied. This kind of listening to words we read in silence takes practice, but it’s easy to begin doing.

Mindful Reading

Mindful reading is reading when your mind is most calm and silent – that is, reading when the monologue has stopped. The key is to find some practices that will help you stop the monologue, at least for a time, so that you can read a text more carefully, more focused, more aware of its nuances and possible meanings. To mindfully read a text, do the following *before* you begin any session of reading:

- **Find a quiet, distraction-free place** with little or no ambient noise or motions in the background. This is important. Sounds and sights around us in small ways take our attention away from a text when we read, even when we don't realize it. Silence and the absence of motion in the environment are your friends when trying to silence the monologue and find focus and awareness when reading.
- **Create a comfortable, upright bodily position** in which to read. If we are going to read with purpose, it makes sense to get our bodies into a position of intention. When you are upright and your back is straight, your diaphragm has more freedom to articulate your lungs—physiologically, you can get the most oxygen to your brain, helping your body stay alert. It's not really a good idea to read lying down. That bodily position is not conducive to alertness and awareness, which is important for carefully reading a text. When you lie down your body begins to shift into rest and relaxation mode. This might work well for you for casual or leisurely reading, but reading academic texts is a different kind of *act* with different *purposes* requiring a different type of *agency*, namely more focus and attention than you might be used to giving while reading.
- **Spend 2-5 minutes just breathing mindfully.** There is lots of research that shows the benefits of mindfulness practices. One of the benefits is helping one to focus just on the body so that the mind's monologue subsides. There are several ways to mindfully breath, but to start, try sitting in your comfortable, upright position, closing your eyes, and breathing in through your nose, deeply and slowly, then out through your mouth slowly and completely. As you breathe, notice the feelings in your body, in your nose as the air comes in, in your belly and throat as you exhale. Just pay attention to those physical sensations. When your mind begins to talk to you, notice the thought and let it go. Don't pursue it or worry about it. Notice and release it. It's okay to have thoughts during mindful breathing. If you practice this, you'll find it easier to clear your mind, but clearing your mind is not the point. The point is to focus on your body, on your breathing. Just be right there in the moment, breathing.
- If you can, **ring a bell or chime and focus on the sound.** By focusing on the sound of the bell as it fades, listening to it, following the sound as it gets softer and softer, you will notice that your mind becomes quieter. Your mind is busy listening to that sound as it fades, searching for hints of its tone. You can repeat this several times. The reason this activity works to help quiet your mind and move you toward a more focused awareness is because of the silence. The silence is actually more important than the sound of the bell. In a sense, you are really listening to silence, which helps your mind settle and focus.

Works Cited

Rosenwasser, David, and Jill Stephen, eds. "The Analytical Frame of Mind." *Writing Analytically*. Custom 7th Edition. Stamford: Cengage, 2015. 1-38. Print.