

## HOW TO READ A BOOK: THE X-RAY METHOD FOR BOOK-LIFE BALANCE

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1. Decide how long, *realistically*, you can spend reading this book, including the time needed for all steps below. We are going to x-ray the book by making an advance plan for reading it, then create a record for later reference by making a summary no longer than one single-spaced page;
2. On a blank sheet, make notes as you do these steps (pencil is best, since you'll make changes);
3. Scrutinize the book's main title/subtitle to discern what you can of its argument and scope;
4. Examine the table of contents to discern the most important chapters, listing those you will read;
5. Scan the index for abstract nouns and concepts, looking for items with many page entries or spans of several pages, while trying to discern analytical themes and arguments;
6. Cross-compare key pages from the index against your list of chapters and adjust your plan, perhaps adding some key passages from chapters that you won't read in full;
7. Scan all footnotes/endnotes for "discursive notes" that explain, dispute, or discuss key debates, arguments, and bodies of literature; again adjust your plan and add some key notes to your list;
8. Scan the acknowledgments for suggestive evidence of the author's friends and enemies, and make final adjustments to your reading plan, which is now a complete list of all the pages you will read;
9. Follow your plan and watch the clock, *sticking to the allotted time*, including writing your x-ray of the book – *a one-page summary, single-spaced, and never longer* – including full citation, arguments, relevant debates, subfields, and other books, chapter titles and descriptions, key page numbers, and short quotations; the purpose of this x-ray summary is to avoid having to reread most books; and
10. Forgive yourself for not reading the entire book, while appreciating yourself for making an intelligent advance plan that enabled you to get through it in the time realistically available – rather than going page-by-page and running out of time without knowing whether you've acquired the main points – then go to bed and get some sleep. Protect your book-life balance!

**Note: In memory of my advisee Sonya Marie Barclay (1959-2008), who made an early version of this handout after I taught her what she dubbed "the Sandage method." Sonya wrote a brilliant dissertation, "Reading the Social Landscape: A Lexicon of Rural Class in Western Pennsylvania, 1790-1860," defended in May 2008. She worked hard to finish, so hard that she ignored symptoms of uterine cancer. Only three weeks after diagnosis, Dr. Sonya Barclay died on Christmas Day 2008, two weeks after she completed all her final grading. Our time is and always will be limited, but academic work is never worth sacrificing your health. Read but rest, for Sonya!**