THE COGNITIVE MAPPING APPROACH

A Method for Analyzing Academic Readings in Preparation for Class Discussions, Writing Assignments, & Examinations

“One must be an inventor to read well.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

STEPS IN OUTLINING READINGS:

Follow these seven steps methodically in taking notes on your assigned reading for most classes, and you will find that even the most challenging readings will yield to this discipline. With practice, cognitive mapping becomes almost automatic. When you gain facility at cognitive mapping, you will find that you are not only a better—more accurate, insightful, and confident—reader, but also a faster reader. The approach does have its limits. You won’t want to use it to read fiction or—perish the thought—poetry! These forms require readers to be very different kinds of “inventors.” Cognitive mapping is, however, an excellent method for analyzing most forms of non-fiction prose, including popular as well as academic writing.

Cognitive mapping is also a very useful tool for coping with and partially taming the information overload that is so pervasive in our postmodern age.

**Step 1 — Key terms and concepts**
What words are the most important building blocks in an author’s argument, theory, or report? Look for words used in titles and sub-headings; words in italics; and words that are emphasized, repeated, or defined within the author’s text. Try to identify and list at least three to five key concepts used in each reading. There may be many important terms in a particular reading; your job is to make a judgment about what words seem to be the most important keys to unlocking the meaning of a particular text. Pay attention to any words that are unfamiliar to you—look them up in a dictionary—but don’t be led astray by complex or abstract terms. Sometimes they are key, but often they attract your attention only because they are unfamiliar and therefore potentially confusing. Pay attention to little words too; like the word, ‘key,’ in this paragraph, they too can be key. Also pay attention to familiar words when they are used in unfamiliar ways. For example, the word ‘mass’ takes on several layers of meaning when used by communication scholars to refer to ‘mass communication.’

**Step 2 — Statement of author’s message**
What is the author’s major point, argument, or thesis? Can you summarize it in a sentence or two? The goal of this step is simply to get the message straight, not to debate it. Sometimes descriptive statements are the easiest way to briefly state the objectives of a writer. Clarity and accuracy are most important here. The ability to summarize fairly, accurately, and concisely is a life skill that will serve you well in whatever career path you follow.

**Step 3 — Identification of major themes**
Identify at least three important themes or sub-topics explored in the reading. List them:

a).

b).

c).

The list will limit and focus your attention. With some readings you may need to identify more than three themes, but it is probably not possible to discuss more than five or six themes in any class session.
Step 4 — Discussion of themes
What does the author say about the themes you've identified? What questions are raised by the author's development of these themes? This step allows for a fairly free ranging discussion of themes. This is the heart of the outline: the place where you store the content that you want to retain. In Steps 1-4, the primary goal is to state, fairly and precisely, the author's position. Steps 5-7 allow you to get much more creative and contentious.

Step 5 — Integration of material with other knowledge
How does this reading relate to other readings or audio-visual material you have been exposed to in this course or in other courses? What connections can you make? Are there any familiar concepts, theories, or examples being presented in a new context? Does the reading help you to better understand an idea explored earlier in the course. If so, how? Does it contradict another reading? How? Basically, what you are asked to do here is 'to compare and contrast.' Integrating and synthesizing related ideas is the heart of creativity. Discovering new relationships among ideas and things that were previously thought to be unrelated is how science and knowledge progress. In sum, this is another terrific life skill. It will not only help you to succeed in college; it will also contribute to making you an innovative thinker.

Step 6 — Application of material
What is the practical value of this material? How does it apply to your own life situation — past, present, or future? Try to think of related examples. What implications does the reading have for your own intellectual interests or pursuits? Does it relate to anything you are learning in your other courses? If so, how? Have you read a novel or seen a film recently that relates to this material? If so, how? Can you use ideas explored in this reading to solve problems, explain contradictions, or identify new problems?

Step 7 — Evaluation of the author's presentation
What are your reactions to this reading? What points do you agree and/or disagree with? Why? What are the strengths and weaknesses in the way the material is presented? In your judgment, has the author left out any important information, condition, or argument? Is the article clearly written, well organized, and cogently developed? Was it challenging reading? Did you have to read the assignment more than once to understand it? Were you bored? Why or why not? Be specific. Give examples. Critical analysis may lead to laudatory as well as negative evaluations. So, be sure to look for "the good" in an author's work as well as for the flaws. Pay attention to nicely crafted phrases, words that sparkle, and quotations that clarify, amplify, and enlighten. Examine how an author constructs a clear and well-structured argument. Consider good uses of evidence, facts, figures, examples, charts, and illustrations. Appreciate persuasive articulations of moral positions that you find admirable. Enjoy stylistic delights. Savor truth and beauty, and search for kernels of wisdom. All human works are flawed and incomplete, even the works of Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, et al, so don't expect perfection. The best critiques usually include reasoned recognition of the achievements as well as the limitations of a particular piece of writing. Critical comments, whether positive or negative, are far more persuasive when they are accompanied by examples: the more examples, the better.

Coda: In cognitive mapping, you are developing and exercising your thinking abilities: doing a form of intellectual calisthenics. While you do need to demonstrate competence in discussing and writing about the specific contents of the assigned readings, it is nevertheless more important to acquire critical thinking skills that will continue to serve you when this course is but a distant memory. The readings should therefore be thought of as materials to think with and against.