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Reading Carefully – An Inductive Method

Hermeneutics – "the study of the methodological principles of interpretation." Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary.

Hermeneutics is usually associated with three disciplines: literature, law, and theology. However, with the post-moderns' argument that everything is text, the prominence of hermeneutics rose dramatically. Contrary to some radical relativists, jurisprudence professor Ronald Dworkin uses the metaphor of a "chain novel" to argue that texts do have constraints on interpretation. If I write the first chapter of a novel in the style of a Western, and you write the second chapter showing the cowboys to be robots, and the next author writes the next chapter having the robots falling passionately in love, we will end up with a pretty incoherent novel. Dworkin and others would argue that some readings of a text are just plain wrong and some are obviously right. How do we do good readings?

An Inductive Method of Reading

1. Initial Impressions
    A. Read the text once through.
    B. Look for repeated words, phrases, and ideas. Circle them with one color each and connect them with lines.
    C. Identify and look up words or terms you are unsure of.
    D. Identify words of contrast – "but," "however," "although".
    E. Write down questions that the text raises for you.
    F. Ask the "who, where, why, when, what, and how" questions.
    G. Try to identify any context for the text.
2. Arguments
    A. Identify imperatives or exhortations.
    B. What arguments are being made in the text? How are those arguments being made? Identify hidden or overt assumptions or assertions (look for "clearly" or "obviously"). Note the use of passive voice. Are there logical fallacies? Are citations accurate and in context?
3. Themes and structure
    A. Identify potential paragraphs or sections by related themes.
    B. Write a brief summary of each section.
    C. How do themes in this section connect to other sections, chapters, etc? Where is the text going?
4. Induction
    A. Draw hypothetical answers to the questions you raised about the text.
    B. What evidence supports each possibility? What evidence contradicts each?
5. Application
    How is the author's argument relevant?

What inferences can you draw for your own writing from the exercise above?

Ronald Dworkin. Law's Empire. 1988.