

How to Read a Nonfiction Excerpt Effectively

Student Resource

Reading a nonfiction excerpt, essay, letter, or speech requires that you consider the rhetoric of the passage as well as the context in which it is delivered. Close reading of nonfiction requires consideration of an author’s argument as well as how that author shapes his/her argument and delivers it to a specific audience.

This resource is the first in a series of a how to effectively read nonfiction. It will focus on how multiple readings of key passages in a work of nonfiction can build student stamina and create student experts capable of masterful close reading.

To understand how to read nonfiction closely, an excerpt from *The Sixth Extinction* by Elizabeth Kolbert will be used as a model. The steps, provided below, should be used each time you examine excerpts from nonfiction.

Listening to Non-Fiction Read Aloud

It can be helpful to listen to audio, when available, of nonfiction. Listening to a spoken word interpretation of any text

- provides a deeper understanding of authorial argument
- highlights an author’s use of rhetorical devices, sentence structure, and organization
- begins an understanding of the passage’s tone and message

Exemplar Rhetorical Analysis Passage

An [audio version of *The Sixth Extinction*](#) can be found online. The short excerpt used in this student resource, represents the first three paragraphs of chapter one.

First Read

When reading a nonfiction passage, it is helpful to write down some beginning observations. Use some version of these questions each time you first read and/or hear a nonfiction excerpt.

First Reading Observations

1. Identify the excerpt’s genre. Letter, speech, essay, or excerpt from a longer work?
2. What is the focus/topic of this excerpt?
3. What might motivate the author or speaker to write/speak about this topic?

Second Read

Next, a student should listen to or read the passage again. Multiple readings help to build better understandings of a text. As you read a second time, you will deepen your observation answers.

Second Reading Analysis

1. Why might the author/speaker choose this genre to convey his/her message?
2. What specific details does the author/speaker provide about this topic?
3. What specific details reveal the motivation for writing/speaking about this topic?

Dividing the Passage into Manageable Sections

Before a reader can understand the intricacies of a passage’s style or rhetoric, it is important to simply identify the key moments in the text. This is most easily accomplished by dividing the passage into smaller sections organized around the passage’s major ideas or events.

Student Model

The excerpt from *The Sixth Extinction* by Elizabeth Kolbert has been included below. The passage has been divided into two parts. After a reader divides up a passage, it is important to define unfamiliar words and summarize each smaller section before moving towards deeper analysis. See the table that follows.

The Sixth Extinction Elizabeth Kolbert

The town of El Valle de Antón, in central Panama, sits in the middle of a volcanic crater formed about a million years ago. The crater is almost four miles wide, but when the weather is clear you can see the jagged hills that surround the town like the walls of a ruined tower. El Valle has one main street, a police station, and an open-air market. In addition to the usual assortment of Panama hats and vividly colored embroidery, the market offers what must be the world's largest selection of golden-frog figurines. There are golden frogs resting on leaves and golden frogs sitting up on their haunches and—rather more difficult to understand—golden frogs clasping cell phones. There are golden frogs wearing frilly skirts and golden frogs striking dance poses and golden frogs smoking cigarettes through a holder, after the fashion of FDR. The golden frog, which is taxicab yellow with dark brown splotches, is endemic to the area around El Valle. It is considered a lucky symbol in Panama; its image is (or at least used to be) printed on lottery tickets.

As recently as a decade ago, golden frogs were easy to spot in the hills around El Valle. The frogs are toxic— it's been calculated that the poison contained in the skin of just one animal could kill a thousand average-sized mice— hence the vivid color, which makes them stand out against the forest floor. One creek not far from El Valle was nicknamed Thousand Frog Stream. A person walking along it would see so many golden frogs sunning themselves on the

banks that, as one herpetologist who made the trip many times put it to me, "it was insane— absolutely insane."

Then the frogs around El Valle started to disappear. The problem— it was not yet perceived as a crisis— was first noticed to the west, near Panama's border with Costa Rica. An American graduate student happened to be studying frogs in the rainforest there. She went back to the States for a while to write her dissertation, and when she returned, she couldn't find any frogs or, for that matter, amphibians of any kind. She had no idea what was going on, but since she needed frogs for her research, she set up a new study site, farther east. At first the frogs at the new site seemed healthy; then the same thing happened: the amphibians vanished. The blight spread through the rainforest until, in 2002, the frogs in the hills and streams around the town of Santa Fe, about fifty miles west of El Valle, were effectively wiped out. In 2004, little corpses began showing up even closer to El Valle, around the town of El Copé. By this point, a group of biologists, some from Panama, others from the United States, had concluded that the golden frog was in grave danger. They decided to try to preserve a remnant population by removing a few dozen of each sex from the forest and raising them indoors. But whatever was killing the frogs was moving even faster than the biologists had feared. Before they could act on their plan, the wave hit.

The Sixth Extinction by Elizabeth Kolbert. © Henry Holt and Company. New York, New York. 2014. Permission Pending.

Rhetorical Analysis Tool: Defining Words and Summarizing Sections

This example shows how a student begins the first step of deconstructing a rhetorical analysis passage after reading it and dividing it into sections. Remember that these first steps are necessary before annotating and analyzing a poem.

Rhetorical Analysis Sections	Words to Define	Summary
<p>The town of El Valle de Antón, in central Panama, sits in the middle of a volcanic crater formed about a million years ago. The crater is almost four miles wide, but when the weather is clear you can see the jagged hills that surround the town like the walls of a ruined tower. El Valle has one main street, a police station, and an open-air market. In addition to the usual assortment of Panama hats and vividly colored embroidery, the market offers what must be the world's largest selection of golden-frog figurines. There are golden frogs resting on leaves and golden frogs sitting up on their haunches and—rather more difficult to understand—golden frogs clasping cell phones. There are golden frogs wearing frilly skirts and golden frogs striking dance poses and golden frogs smoking cigarettes through a holder, after the fashion of FDR. The golden frog, which is taxicab yellow with dark brown splotches, is endemic to the area around El Valle. It is considered a lucky symbol in Panama; its image is (or at least used to be) printed on lottery tickets.</p> <p>As recently as a decade ago, golden frogs were easy to spot in the hills around El Valle. The frogs are toxic—it's been calculated that the poison contained in the skin of just one animal could kill a thousand average-sized mice—hence the vivid color, which makes them stand out against the forest floor. One creek not far from El Valle was nicknamed Thousand Frog Stream. A person walking along it would see so many golden frogs sunning themselves on the banks that, as one herpetologist who made the trip many times put it to me, “it was insane—absolutely insane.”</p>	<p>Panama—a country on the isthmus, or narrow strip of land, linking Central and South America</p> <p>FDR—short for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the thirty-second president of the United States of America.</p> <p>endemic—native; belonging to a certain area.</p> <p>haunches—the upper part of an animal's rear leg.</p> <p>herpetologist—a scientist who studies reptiles, frogs, toads, salamanders, etc.</p>	<p><i>The Panamanian town of El Valle de Antón is known for its golden frogs. In Panama, the golden frogs are known as a symbol of luck. They are also highly poisonous and clearly marked by their coloring. Ten years ago, golden frogs were easy to find around the small, picturesque town of El Valle de Antón.</i></p>

Rhetorical Analysis Sections	Words to Define	Summary
<p>Then the frogs around El Valle started to disappear. The problem—it was not yet perceived as a crisis—was first noticed to the west, near Panama’s border with Costa Rica. An American graduate student happened to be studying frogs in the rainforest there. She went back to the States for a while to write her dissertation, and when she returned, she couldn’t find any frogs or, for that matter, amphibians of any kind. She had no idea what was going on, but since she needed frogs for her research, she set up a new study site, farther east. At first the frogs at the new site seemed healthy; then the same thing happened: the amphibians vanished. The blight spread through the rainforest until, in 2002, the frogs in the hills and streams around the town of Santa Fe, about fifty miles west of El Valle, were effectively wiped out. In 2004, little corpses began showing up even closer to El Valle, around the town of El Copé. By this point, a group of biologists, some from Panama, others from the United States, had concluded that the golden frog was in grave danger. They decided to try to preserve a remnant population by removing a few dozen of each sex from the forest and raising them indoors. But whatever was killing the frogs was moving even faster than the biologists had feared. Before they could act on their plan, the wave hit.</p>	<p>dissertation—an extended written document that graduate students complete to obtain their PhDs.</p> <p>amphibians—cold-blooded vertebrates including frogs, toads, salamanders.</p> <p>blight—disease that destroys a significant amount of a plant or animal population.</p> <p>biologist—a scientific expert who studies living organisms.</p> <p>grave—serious, severe, extremely concerning.</p> <p>remnant—a small portion/part.</p>	<p><i>A graduate student who was studying the golden frogs in El Valle de Antón noticed they were disappearing. The graduate student kept moving eastward to find the frogs. When she found them again, she noticed that they were getting sick and dying in large numbers. Even though biologists believed that they could save a small portion of the golden frogs by preserving them in captivity, the disease hit faster than they could act.</i></p>

How to Read Nonfiction Passages: Steps to Success

This reference document provides the steps discussed in the student resources succinctly. Students will want to keep this list close at hand until they internalize these steps.

1. Listen to the nonfiction excerpt or read it out loud.

Eventually you should be able to read the nonfiction excerpt to yourself and hear intonation without reading aloud. Until then, this is a very important step.

2. Write down your observations. Use the questions below.

First Read

1. Identify the excerpt's genre. Letter, speech, essay, or excerpt from a longer work?
2. What is the focus/topic of this excerpt?
3. What might motivate the author or speaker to write/speak about this topic?

4. Read the passage again.

Again, eventually this will become an individual and silent activity. Until then, it is important to hear/read the passage a second time.

5. Review your previous observations and add to them. Use the questions below.

Second Read

1. Why might the author/speaker choose this genre to convey his/her message?
2. What specific details does the author/speaker provide about this topic?
3. What specific details reveal the motivation for writing/speaking about this topic?

6. Divide the passage into smaller sections.

It is important to read for shifts or changes in the passage. You may divide the passage into smaller sections based on the content of the passage, its organization, etc.

7. Define any unfamiliar words within the passage.

When you have access to a dictionary, online or in print, use it to define words. When you do not have access to a dictionary, try your best to define the word by reading for context clues that will help with a working definition.

8. Summarize each section of the passage.

Provide a simple summary to make sure you understand the foundation of experiences, emotions, or events before attempting to identify the larger thematic meaning of the passage.