

Difficulty of Reading Foucault

Outline by John Protevi / Permission to reproduce granted for academic use

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MF's books and essays through 1969 are quite difficult, as he adopts the style of writing common to French intellectuals in the 60s: complex syntax, a love of paradox, elliptical phrasing, an assumption of familiarity with a vast and deep culture--all designed to produce an effect of effortless brilliance. This can be partially explained by F's relative youth: he was a young *normalien* who wanted to break into the Parisian scene, and that's how intellectuals wrote then. In any event, even at the height of his difficulty, he's never as recondite as Derrida, for instance, for which we can be thankful. By the mid-70s however, F's style simplifies dramatically, and DP and HS 1 are really quite clear. I suspect this is a result of F's "politicization" in the 69-73 period, in which he saw his audience and role changing from that of young lion trying to break into an intellectual scene to that of "specific intellectual" trying to intervene in a power/knowledge system by providing a "toolbox" of concepts and historical analyses others can use in local struggles.

How to read a difficult writer?

1. Don't be discouraged at having to read several times.
2. Read at different speeds: skim first to identify the overall structure, main points, and key passages, then re-read carefully the key passages.
3. Form reading groups in which you discuss your take on the readings.
4. Find someone not in the course and try to explain the main points to them.

How to write on a difficult writer?

1. Identify a topic early.
2. Leave enough time for multiple drafts.
3. Use early drafts to allow a thesis to come to you.
4. Show your writing to others early and often (a writing group is a great idea).
5. Show later drafts to me.