Advice for Active Reading – Dr. Shepherd

What is Active Reading?
Active Reading is not the same as “skimming a book.” Skimming does not have any real intellectual or pedagogical basis: it’s akin to looking at a book superficially without any scholarly foundation or objectives. Active Reading is based on sound scholarly principles and the awareness that books have common components and intellectual objectives. Active Reading starts with a list of things to look for: these things help you process the central goals and objectives of each book. Active Reading allows you to focus on key points, ideas, themes, and examples, while simultaneously culling through mountains of detail and information: most of which you will never remember. This approach is applicable for books or articles, just adjust for the length and type of piece you are reading. Following these guidelines will allow you to effectively, intelligently, and efficiently read books/articles.

10 Main Points
1. What is the context of the class? What is the relationship to main themes of course?
   a. Theme, person, era, event, issue?
2. Look over the whole piece. Read the back cover or abstract. What does the title mean?
   a. What do you think the piece is going to say or do, even before reading it?
3. Read the introduction scrupulously.
   a. Argument / Thesis? The most important assertion?
      • Locate a sentence or two, or a paragraph that represents the thesis.
      • Restate the thesis in your own words
   b. Historiographical engagement?
   c. What is/are the main objective/s (goals/purpose) of the book?
4. How is each chapter or section related to the main points of the introduction?
5. Chapters sometimes have intros. Read closely but skim the topic sentences in chapter.
   a. Topic sentences are extremely important signposts for the content and themes of a book or article. Use them to indicate good examples.
6. Following the topic sentences, take note of one or two concrete examples from each chapter or section that support the goals of the chapter & book
7. Time yourself. Don’t spend more than 45-60 minutes on each chapter.
8. Take minimal few notes
   a. Focus on the thesis/argument; significance of the book; the best examples that support the overall argument; and your analysis of and reaction to the book.
9. Read the conclusion closely.
10. How does the entire piece stand together?
    a. Did the author support their thesis?
    b. Do the examples, issues or themes convince you of their argument?
    c. What is your overall analysis and assessment of the book

Reminders
• At some point you should read reviews of the book, but search for reviews that laud and critique the book. Also look for reviews from different kinds of journals that may offer different perspectives on the book.
• It will probably be difficult to actively read a book the first time you attempt it.
• You still must “know the book” and be prepared to discuss it in class!!!