

# Reading: Tips for Active Reading in Online Courses

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While all composition courses focus intensively on reading and writing, taking these courses online necessarily adds in some extra reading time. Alongside the more typical articles and chapters you'll encounter, reading will likely take the place of listening to in-person instructions from your instructor, and discussion boards will replace face-to-face conversations about material. Similarly, you'll be receiving written feedback on your work that will be an important step in applying new knowledge to improve on each project.

So, how can you engage effectively, use time efficiently, and make sure you're getting the most you can out of a text? Use this document for ideas and strategies to read to the best of your ability.

## Digital vs. Print Texts

Many courses offer a variety of or choice between electronic access to material and traditional print resources. Both boast many advantages, but there may be some serious drawbacks, so how do you choose? The short version: taking effective notes improves your memory of the text (Watkins et al. 7; Yeh et al. 36; Reid et al. 41) and there's evidence that reading a printed text will help you retain information better (Walker; Jabr).

But before you click print or go buy the way-more-expensive print textbook, there are a lot of great reasons to use technology, and a lot of ways to make tech work for you. Consider some of these advantages of reading with digital texts:

- Screen readers and assistive technology:
  - It's like we're living in the future with some of the modern capabilities of digital texts. The [Student Disability Center](#) has worked hard to ensure that you have access to materials, including assistive technology that can read resources to you; if you're having trouble with access, reach out to the SDC to partner with the [Assistive Technology Resource Center](#) to learn more about these important tools.
- Tech Tips:
  - Your tech can do a lot more than the paper page. As you read, consider using built-in features, like the dictionary, to enhance your reading without having to pause to look something up. Take advantage of hyperlinks in the text to view other texts, maps, or authors being referenced with a quick click (Kimmel 11). This can build your research and expand the context to help you better understand the situation as you read, giving you more to work with than a traditional text may offer.
- Collaboration:
  - With so many systems to share documents, collaboration is a strong advantage of reading digitally. Similar to peer review where you can see your peers' previous comments and build on those ideas, you can apply this strategy on any assigned reading and begin valuable conversations in the margins of each text (Yeh et al. 27).

- *Google Docs*: With access to Google through your CSU account, consider sharing your annotations with classmates to help engage and build relationships over text. Chances are, they'll notice something you didn't and you can answer the questions they're stuck on, too.
- *OneNote*: [A Microsoft program that you also have free access to through the Microsoft Online Suite](#), OneNote allows you to build “notebooks” and share files that automatically update when you’re online. This is a great tool for reading with PDFs!
- Cost and Convenience:
  - Not to be overlooked, online textbooks and accessing everything through the computer is definitely a cheaper way to go. It’s also a lot easier to pack up your laptop or tablet and hit the library than it is to sort through a mass of heavy textbooks and then accidentally grab the wrong notebook. Just don’t forget your charger!

### [Disadvantages:](#)

Just don’t forget the potential drawbacks of going all digital. Many studies identify skimming and scanning as a drawback to reading online – we’re used to scrolling and scrolling and scrolling, so we tend to go through texts the same way as Instagram which doesn’t help with remembering what was read (Alexander and Singer Trakhman). Slowing down and making sure that you’re taking notes, either on-screen or in a separate notebook, will help make sure that things stick (Walker). Even changing the settings from that constant scrolling to look like turning a page, like with ereaders, is an easy way to help your brain remember information, making it easier to locate again if you ever need to go back to the text (Jabr). The most important thing to do is limit distractions, so consider going into airplane mode when you do sit down to read, or turn off your notifications so that you don’t fall into an hours-long click-hole without ever actually reading.

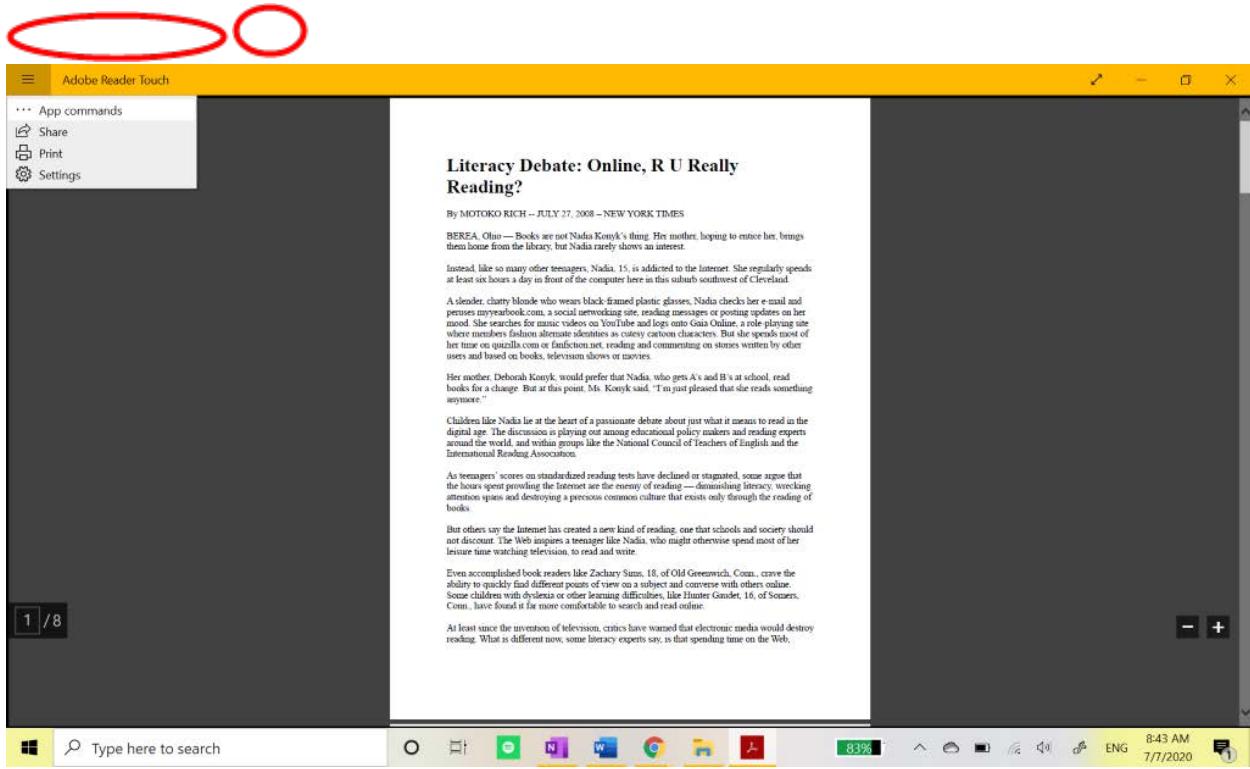
- To print or not to print? Ultimately, the choice is yours. [Use the flowchart here](#) to do a quick assessment to decide if you want to print out that article.

### [Digital Annotating Strategies](#)

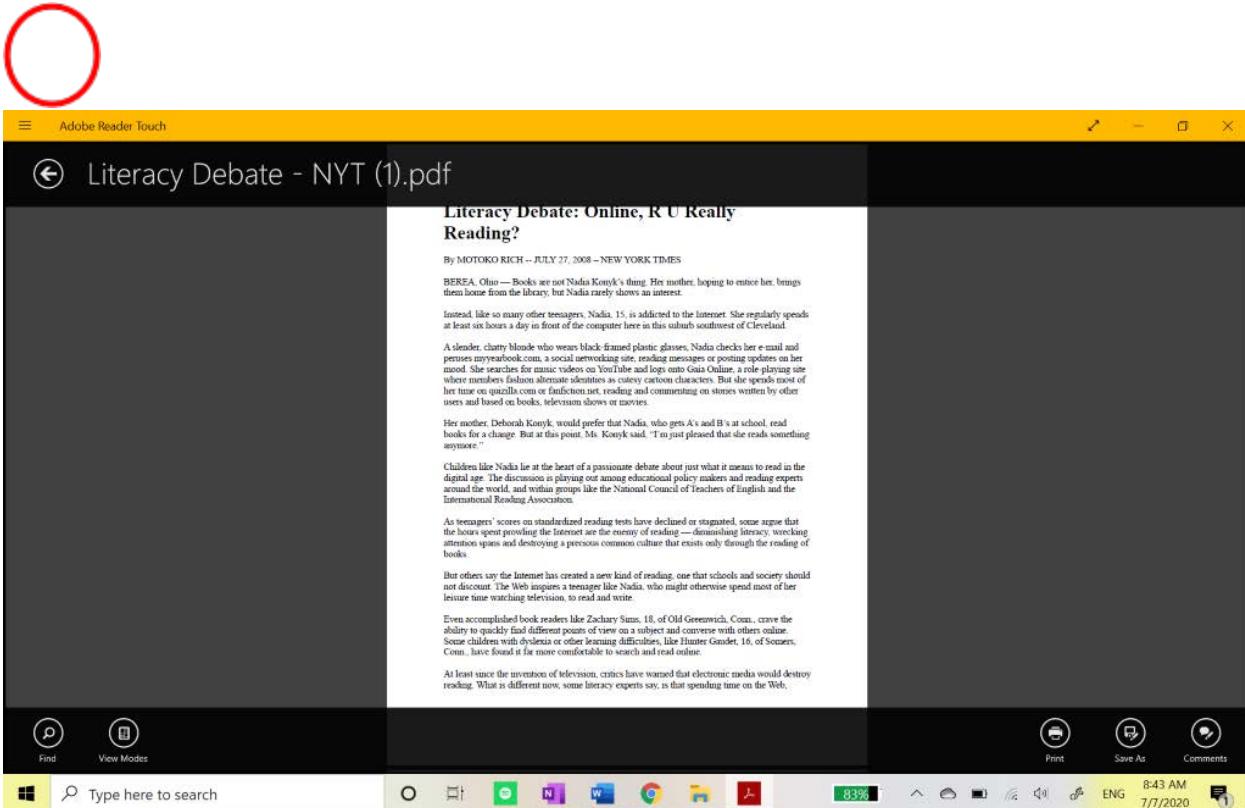
How often are you taking notes during your online courses? Research reports that students are less likely to take notes in online courses, which may be due to the fact that you can go back and access information at any time (Watkins et al. 2). But, this actually works against your memory and retention. When reading online, notes become even more important to help track, recall, and apply information. Follow these guidelines will improve your retention and make sure you get the most out of a text:

- Highlight, define, and underline:
  - This is a quick task that can help keep you oriented in a text, though it’s also one of the less effective ways to annotate (Reid et al. 30). To make these annotations more effective, consider developing a code or system; for example, underline the thesis, but use yellow highlighting for key points, while green highlighting identifies words or concepts to look up. You can perform these functions simply on Google Docs and Microsoft Word, as well as with the free Adobe download for your machine and follow the instructions below to use the highlighting features. The screenshots below model the program Adobe Reader Touch, a free download for PC (pictured below) and Mac.

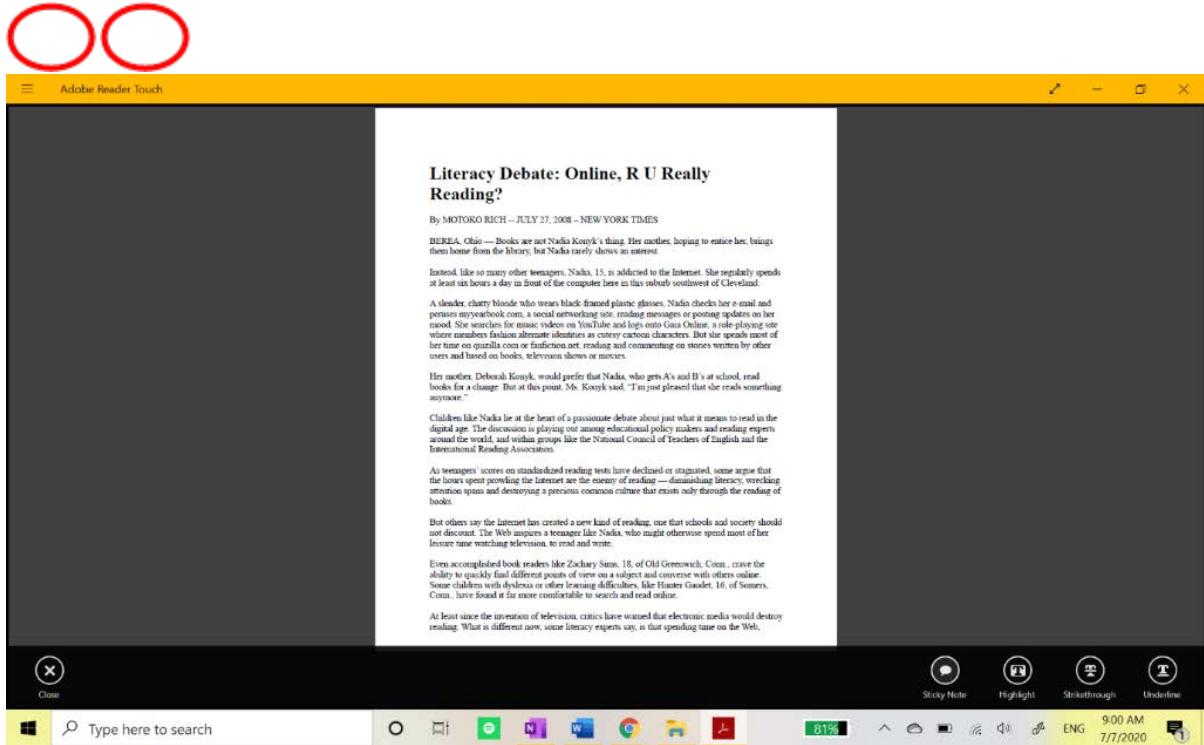
- With the document open in Adobe, select the menu in the top left with the three lines, then choose the first option in the menu, “App Commands.”

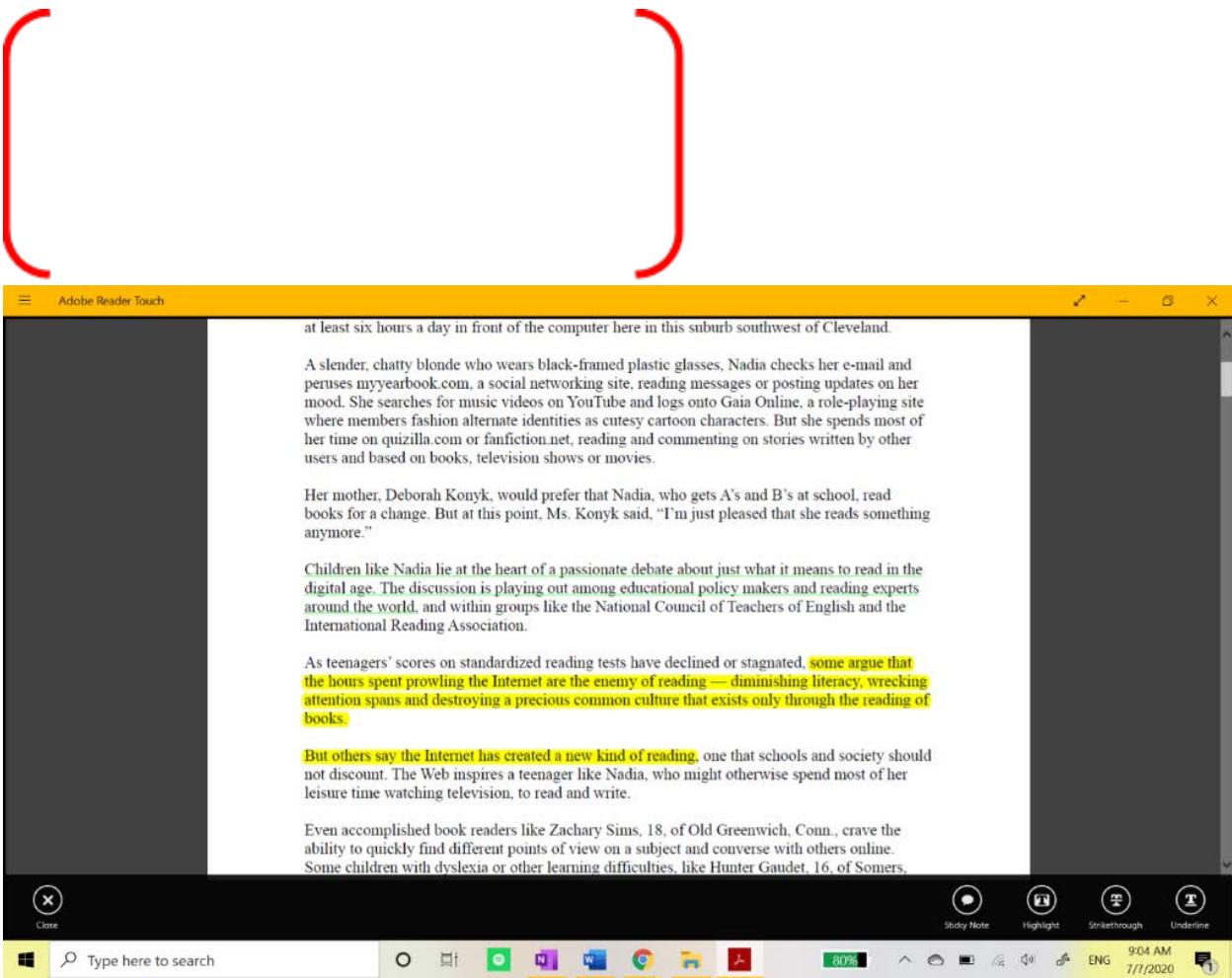


- This will now show options for the document, including “comments” in the bottom right corner. Select this option.

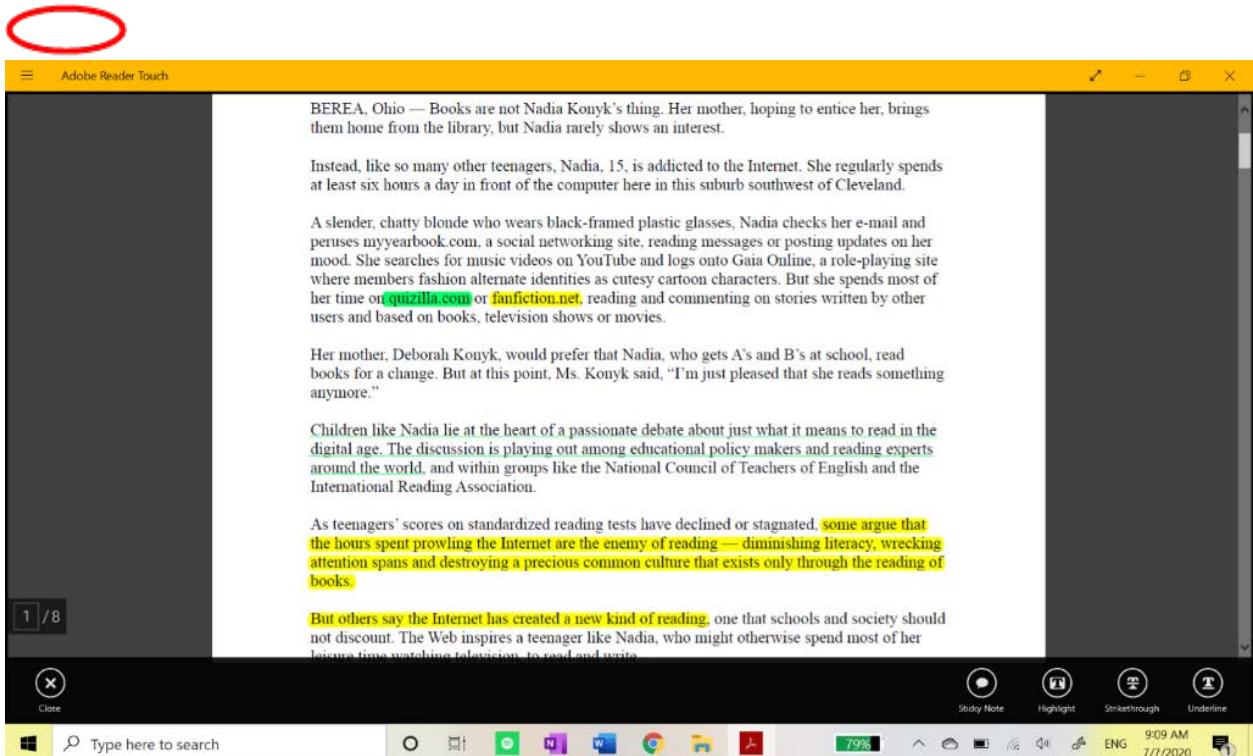
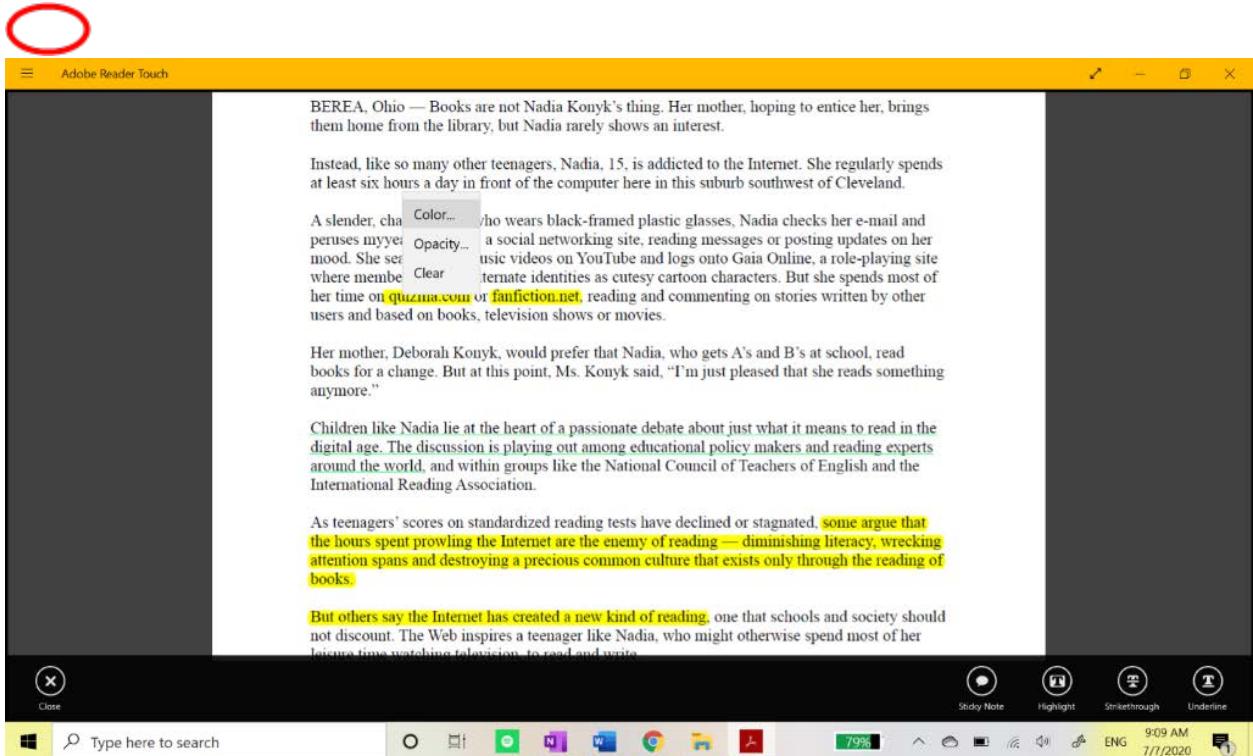


- This feature gives you the option to annotate text in a variety of ways, like highlighting and underlining, seen in the bottom right corner of the first screenshot. To use these features, click on the preferred annotation, and then select the text by clicking and dragging. See the results in the second screenshot below.





- To change the color of highlighting, click the highlighted section to bring up a menu. To change colors, select the first option, “Color.” Or, to delete your highlighting, select the last option, “Clear.” The same functions works to change the color of your underlining.



Since you just need to drag your pen across the page for these kinds of notes, you're not engaging with a lot of higher-level thinking. Be sure to take the next steps to more thoroughly process the texts you're reading.

- Summarize, ask questions in the margins, and reflect:
  - These strategies will allow you to engage in higher-level thinking and work toward “deep reading” (Kimmel 10), a process that helps encode memories and activates critical thinking skills. In a study by Reid et al., students who both summarized and paused to reflect on a text scored higher in reading comprehension than those who didn’t take any notes. To take more developed notes, use the comment feature in word processing programs, add a “sticky note” in a PDF (an option alongside highlighting and underlining), or open a new document or notebook to take notes as you’re reading.

To make sure you’re getting the most out of your texts and can apply them to your courses, take these specific steps to activate higher-level thinking and test your own understanding:

- *Summarize*:
  - Either after each paragraph or when you finish a reading, jot down what you just read. This quick recall will help code the memories and make it easier to access the next time you think about the text (Reid et al. 31).
- *Ask questions in the margins*:
  - If anything is unclear as you read, identifying the idea you want to clarify or what’s confusing will not only help you locate it, but it will also get you started thinking. If you’re collaborating with others, your classmates may be able to comment back and further your understanding (Yeh et al. 32).
- *Reflect*:
  - As you read, challenge yourself! Part of slowing down your reading includes checking in with yourself and simply asking “How much am I understanding?” Not only will this help with your learning process, but learners who ask themselves questions like this are also better able to gauge their progress and predict how well they’ll do on comprehension tests (Reid et al. 41).
- Follow a template or graphic organizer:
  - Researchers have spent decades developing systems for note-taking. If you’ve always dreaded annotating, it may just be that you haven’t found the best system that works for you. With these note-taking templates, or just finding a consistent form of note-taking that works for you, you can lessen the amount of brainpower that’s getting siphoned off to take notes and put more energy into processing the reading (Watkins et al. 7). [This article by Oxford Learning](#) offers a variety of templates, explaining how and when to use each technique, such as:

# THE CORNELL NOTE TAKING METHOD

**BEST FOR**  
Understanding key ideas and relationships

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CUES: 2.5 INCHES	NOTES: 6 INCHES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cues</li> <li>② After Class Main ideas, prompts &amp; questions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Notes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>① During Class Main points and details from class</li> </ul>
<b>Summary</b> ③ After Class <i>Summary of the lesson, highlighting</i>	

SUMMARY 2 INCHES

```

graph TD
    MT[Main Topic] --- ST1[Subtopic #1]
    MT --- ST2[Subtopic #2]
    ST1 --- KD1[Key Details]
    ST2 --- KD2[Key Details]
    KD1 --- P1_1[Point 1]
    KD1 --- P1_2[Point 2]
    KD1 --- P1_3[Point 3]
    KD2 --- P2_1[Point 1]
    KD2 --- P2_2[Point 2]
    KD2 --- P2_3[Point 3]
  
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# THE MAPPING NOTE TAKING METHOD

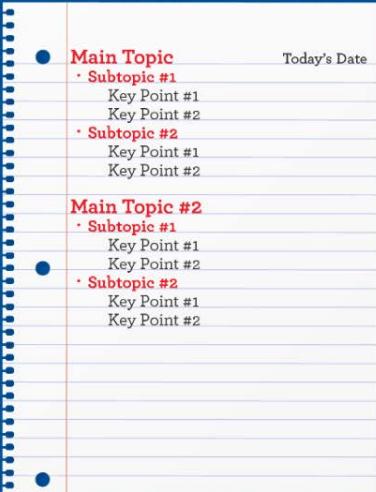
**BEST FOR**  
Visualizing connected topics and ideas

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# THE OUTLINING NOTE TAKING METHOD

## BEST FOR

Easily creating study  
questions for review

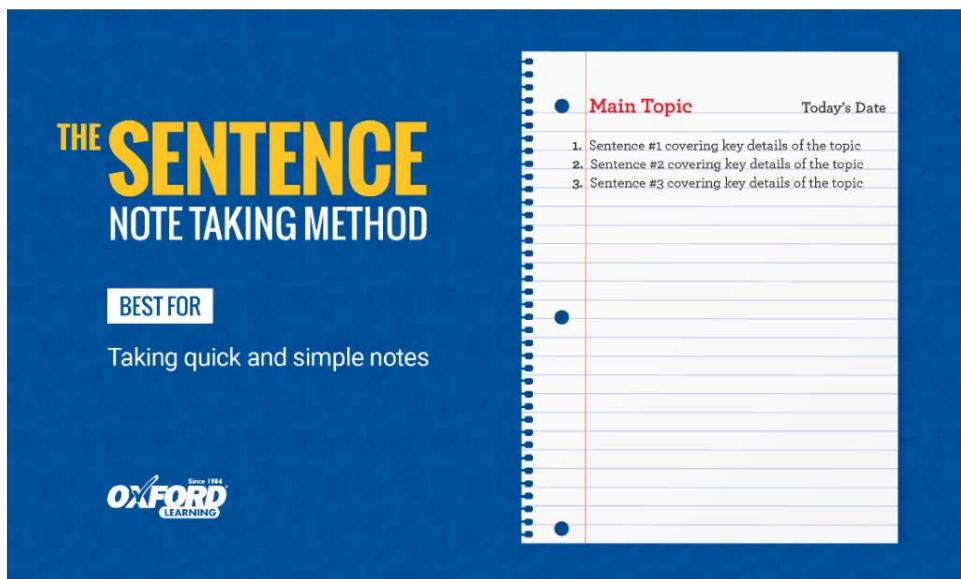


# THE CHARTING NOTE TAKING METHOD

## BEST FOR

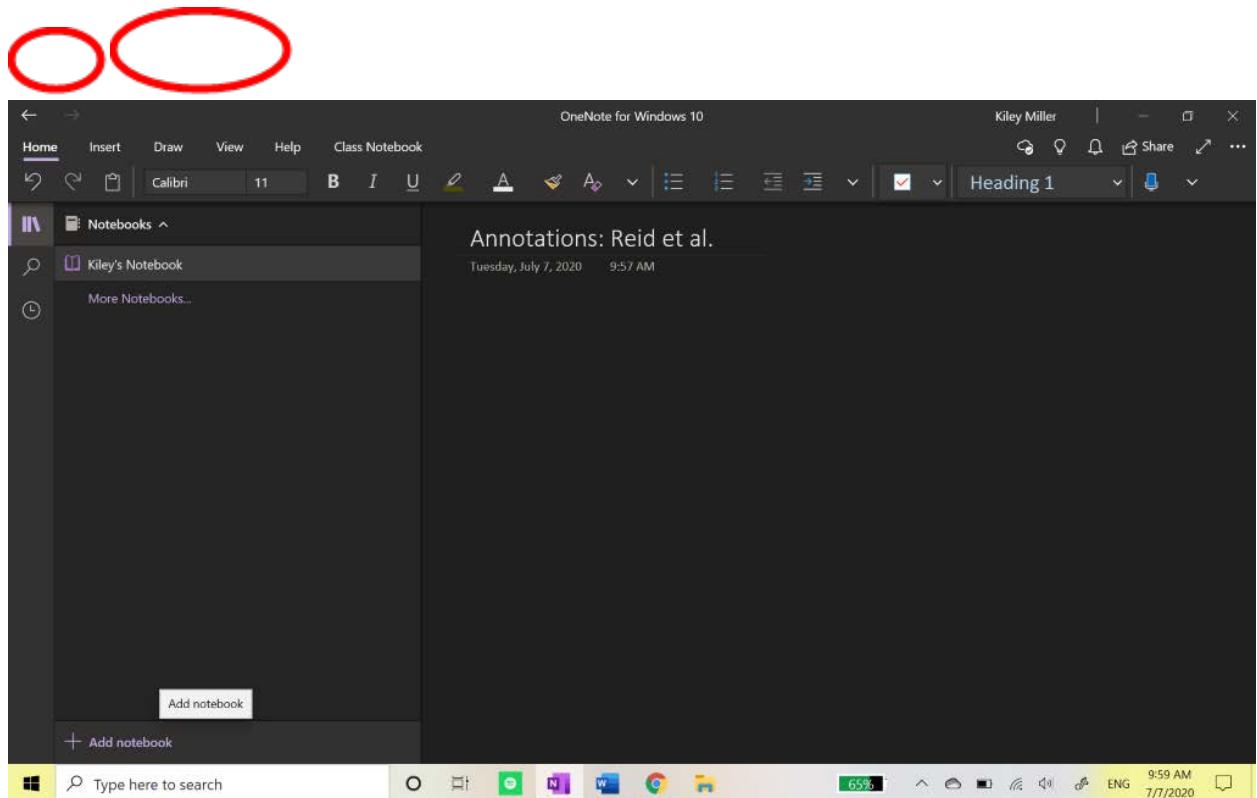
Reviewing lots of facts



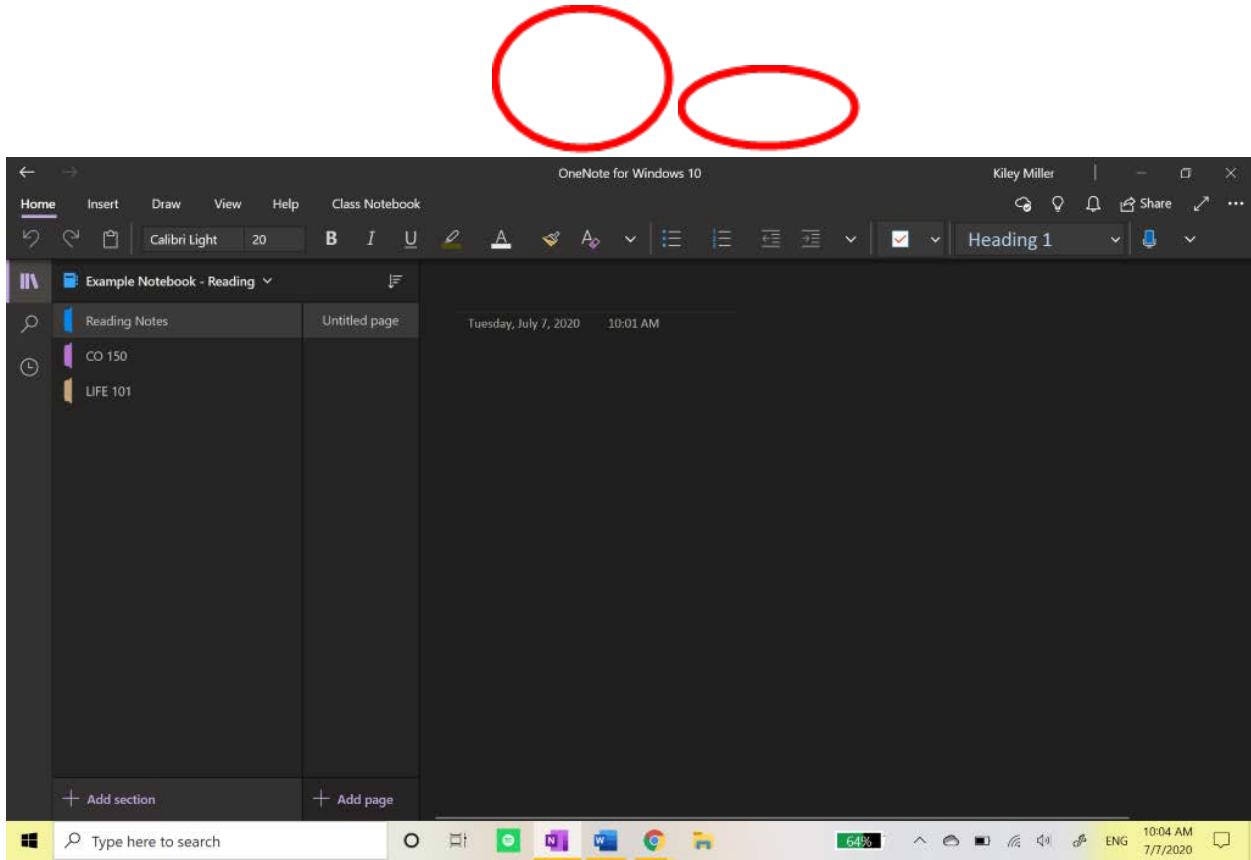


One program that includes a lot of these features is OneNote, part of the Microsoft Suite that you have access to as a CSU student for free. Accessible on and off-line, this program allows you to take notes like you would in a paper notebook, creating different sections and documents within those sections.

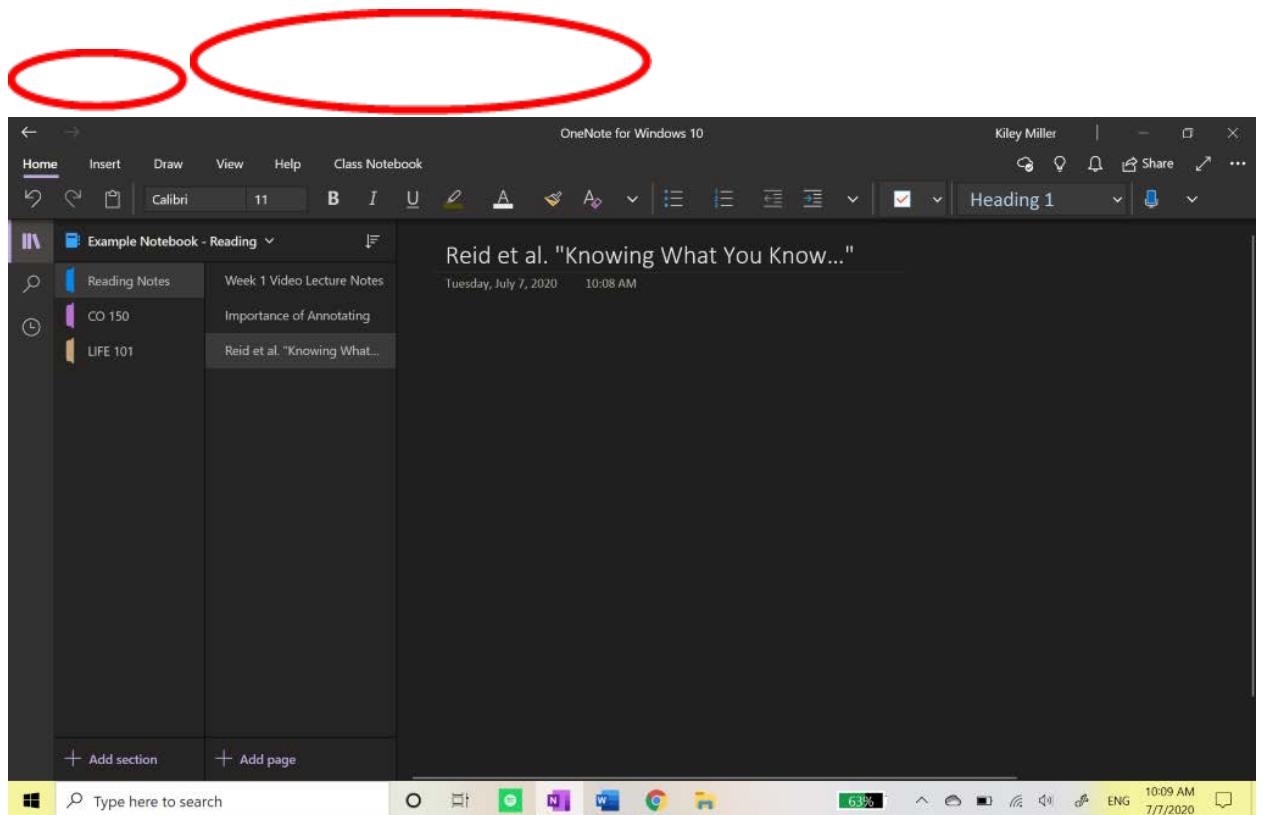
1. To start, open OneNote and begin a notebook, as seen below:



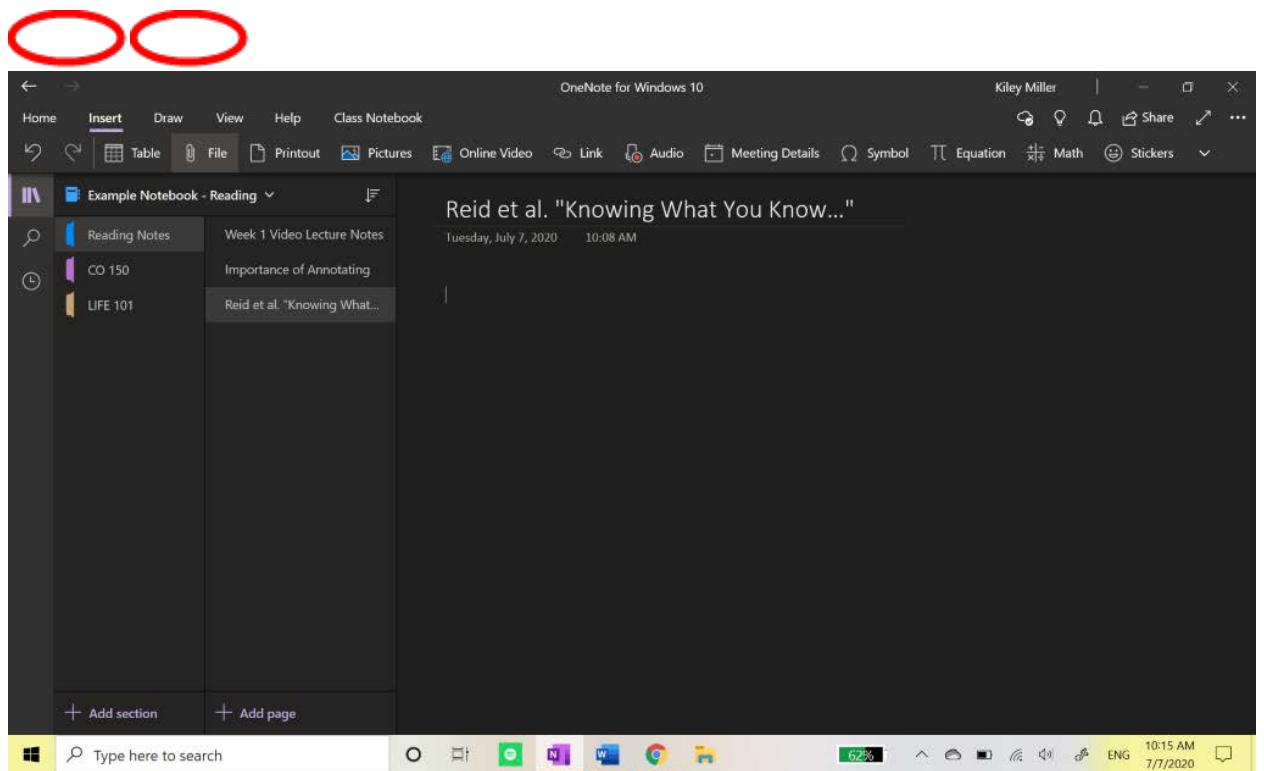
2. Within your notebook, create sections to organize your courses, projects, or papers.



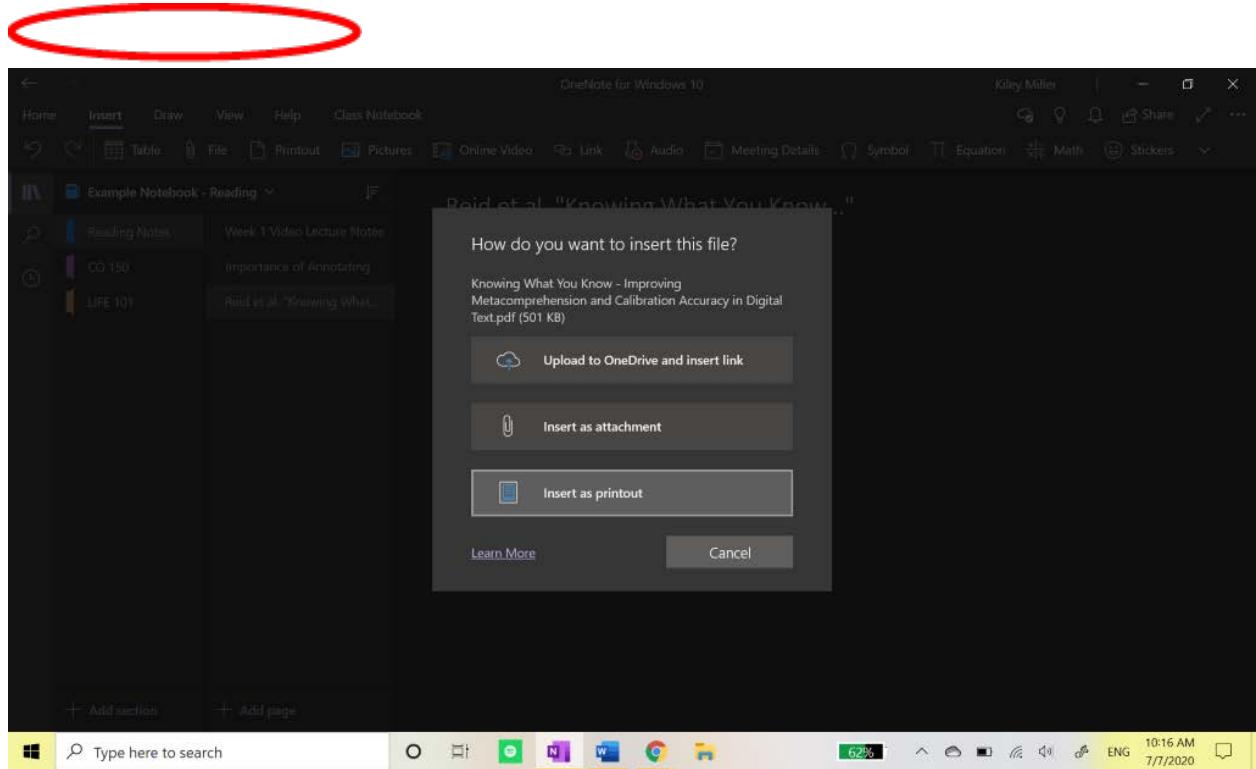
3. Within the section, add pages as needed. This is a great place to keep daily notes from course lectures, collect and annotate readings and handouts, and track your research. To name a page, use the notebook-page on the right, which is already dated for you. With your pages organized, click anywhere on the page below the title to add notes.



4. For annotating a text, save the file to your computer, and then choose the “insert” tab, and select “file” to access documents saved to your computer.

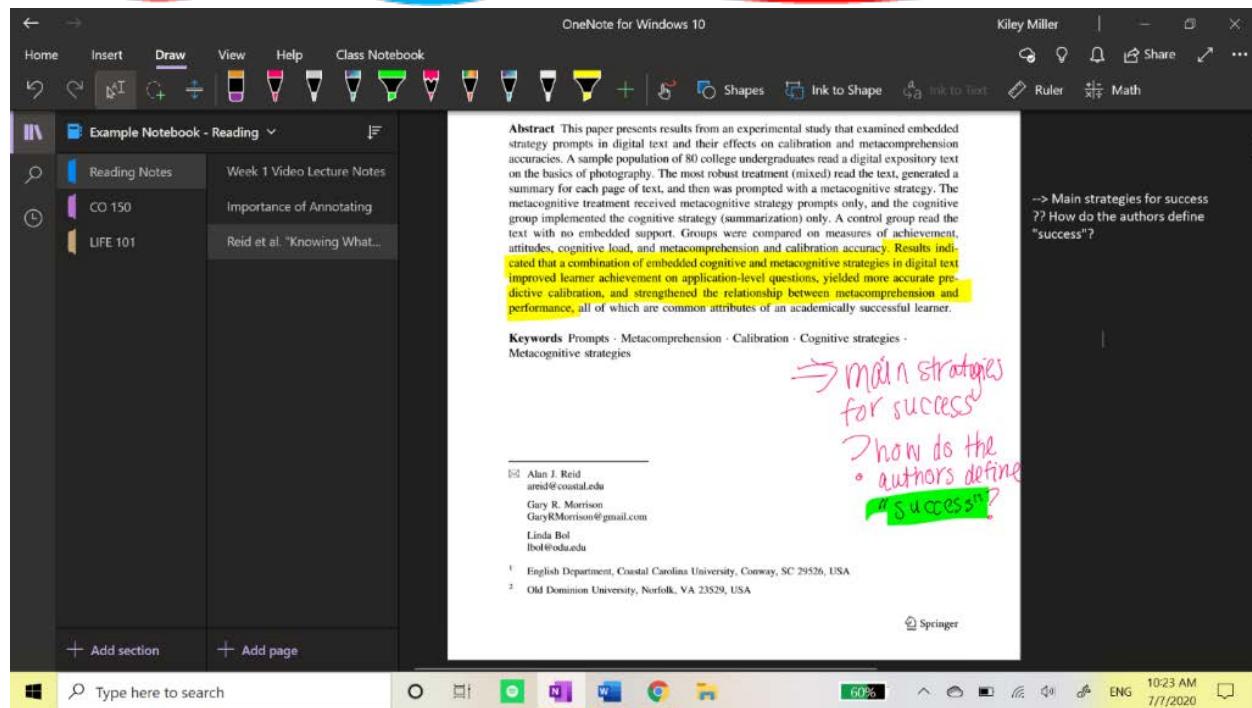
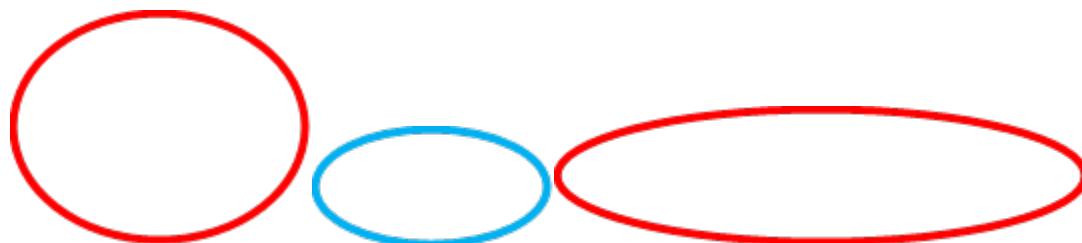
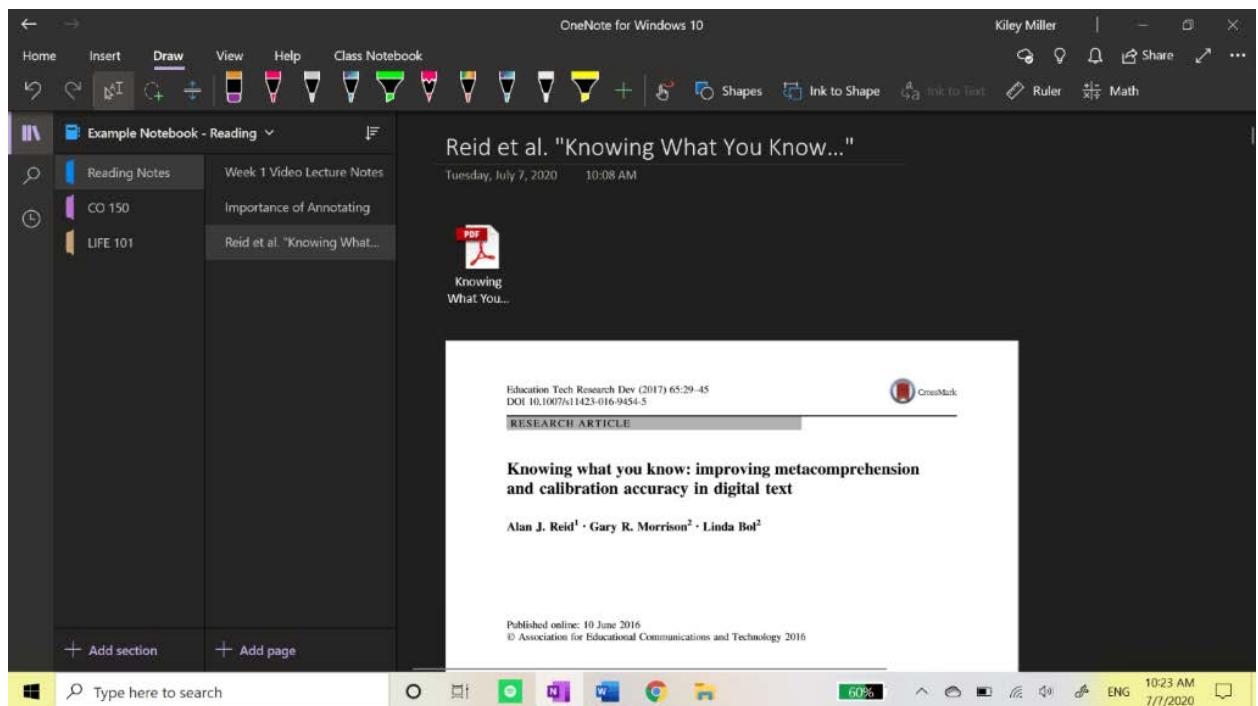


5. For the easiest annotations, select “Insert as printout” so that you can annotate alongside the text, just like if you were to print the text.



6. For computers or tablets with a stylus, the “draw” tab will give you a range of options to hand-write and highlight within the text, like you see below in the red circle.

- Similar notes can be taken by clicking and typing alongside the document, as seen in the blue circle, though highlighting within the inserted document using a trackpad or mouse is not possible.



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