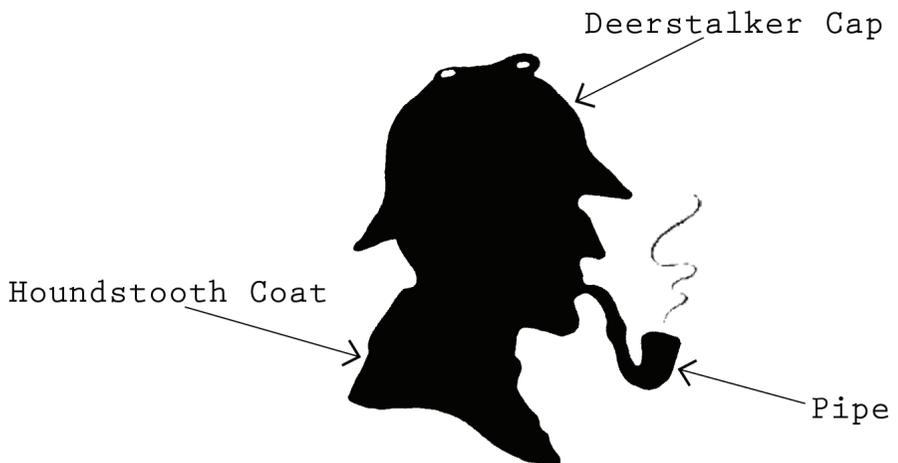


Chapter 7

Take the Mystery Out of Your Reading

The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, and every character on every version of *CSI* combined can't compete with the crime-solving brilliance of one man: Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes is the most famous detective the world has ever known. If you can't picture him, he looks like this:



But it's not just the snazzy getup that makes Sherlock so famous. It's that he takes cases that everyone else thinks are impossible to crack, and he works with the clues until he has solved them—every time. With Sherlock, no clue gets left unnoticed, no fact is insignificant, and everyone is a suspect until he or she can be definitively ruled out. Unlike the more run-of-the-mill investigators that he encounters, Sherlock never comes to a conclusion about what happened in a case or how exciting or interesting that case may be until he has rigorously examined all of the facts.

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

—Sherlock Holmes, *A Scandal in Bohemia*

Sometimes, Sherlock arrives at the scene of the crime, only to find that Inspector Lestrade (his somewhat bumbling contact in the police department) has already arrested the victim's wife, claiming that she “must be the murderer, because she was the only other person in the room.” Whenever a case comes up, Lestrade looks to nab the criminal right away. He jumps to conclusions, falls for misleading clues, and arrives at overly simple answers. Sherlock, on the other hand, makes a point to ignore that kind of snap judgment and just focuses on clearing up the facts. Sherlock sits in his chair, smoking his pipe and turning the facts over in his mind, trying to figure out what else the data could mean. When he has made sense of it all, he can easily form his own theory, because he has eliminated all other possibilities. Even when the police have declared the crime “unsolvable” based on a lack of evidence—a missing body, or no murder weapon to be found—Sherlock is hesitant to agree. He knows that there are always enough clues to solve any crime.

While you probably won't need to use Sherlock Holmes' skills to solve a murder or major heist anytime soon, you *do* need

Sherlock's skills in school—every time that you open your reading. That's right—Sherlock Holmes needs to teach you how to read.

“What? Uh, I already *know* how to read. After all, I'm reading this sentence right now. Proof!” Yes, yes, we know that you know how to read words and understand what they mean. But have you ever had the experience of reaching the end of a passage you've just read and realizing you were totally zoning out and you have no clue what it was about? Or how about when your English class reads a new novel and some student immediately makes a comment like, “Oh! I love how the author uses this extended metaphor to convey the perils of communism!” (And you're thinking, “Communism? Isn't this a book about talking farm animals?”)

We've all been in the position of feeling like we're totally missing the point of a passage. And that's because while we're great at reading the words and sentences, we often have the wrong idea about how reading should work. Most students read in the same way that a cartoon character eats corn on the cob. They chomp rapid-fire down one row, then robotically move down to the next row and chomp their way across again... chomp-chomp-chomp-move, chomp-chomp-chomp-move... once a row is done, there's no going back. They barrel through the passage, reach the end, and then wonder why their brain hasn't digested the material.

Corn-on-the-cob reading works really well for a casual email or a facebook post—in other words, if you have already automated all of the small pieces and ideas. In fact, you can probably corn-on-the-cob read many sections of this book, because it's written in language that you already use all the time. But in school, corn-on-the-cob reading sets you up to have writer's block for your essays and a mountain of memorization to do when it's time to study for the test. Reading something new is not about going directly from start to finish, and certainly the insight is not just going to come to you because you've read the words and sentences. You have to be a detective. Once you've made the facts of a passage Cake-Mix

Clear, bring your best Sherlock to the table. With his approach, you're guaranteed to solve the mystery and get to the heart of what the passage is really saying. If you're reading like Sherlock from the start, then you'll find that everything makes a lot more sense, and a lot of the work of school just disappears.

Cracking the “Impossible” Case

“Good books don’t give up their secrets all at once.”

—Stephen King

One of the reasons that Sherlock is able to crack any case is that he never lets himself get intimidated. No case is too scary or too overwhelming for him to take on. That's essential, because Sherlock has had cases in which he shows up to a house, and the only “facts” are that they have a missing butler and a missing maid. That tends to not feel like he has “facts” at all. Most of the investigators give up, because they are trying to deal with all of the unfamiliar details at once, and nothing seems like it provides a solid starting point. That's a problem that students face all the time, and it happens the most often when students start to read Shakespeare.

Yup. We said it. *Shakespeare*. The dirty, scary word of English classes everywhere. Teachers love him. You know who else loves him? Your amygdala. Shakespeare has a reputation in high schools everywhere for being scary and impossible. But that's a pretty unfounded conclusion, because most students see that old-school language and develop a judgment about it—that it's hard or boring or intimidating—without ever having tried to dig in and solve the mystery. Luckily, Sherlock can get to the bottom of even the toughest case.

Break Your Fear of Shakespeare: The Case of The Merciless Sonnet

Vikram Gupta had been staring at the computer screen for an hour. The little cursor had been blinking in the same spot the entire time. He was supposed to write a paper on this Shakespeare thingy for his English class, and he had no clue what to say. It was due the next day, and he could already tell it was going to be a loooooong night.

Vikram hated English class, because he felt like the kids who did well just made up stuff about the books they read. “Well, when you juxtapose the *multiple allusions* to the works of Dante with the *subtle imagery of spoons* in Chapter Three, it’s *more than clear* that the author was really making a *statement* against post-Victorian Society.” Vikram never seemed to see those things. How was he supposed to guess what his teacher wanted to hear about this Shakespeare poem? In his mind, math was easy. Science was easy. They made sense, and they were logical. But reading—books, writing, literature—who had time for that kind of fluff?

Katie arrived on the scene, expecting to go through Vikram’s first draft with him. But there was no first draft. So far, his essay said this: “Vikram Gupta, English 11B.” He sighed and said, “I have no idea what to say about this stupid poem. Ugh! I just want to get this over with.” Katie totally knew how he felt. But there was something important that Vikram was missing. If Vikram was drawing a blank when he went to write his essay, then he didn’t know what

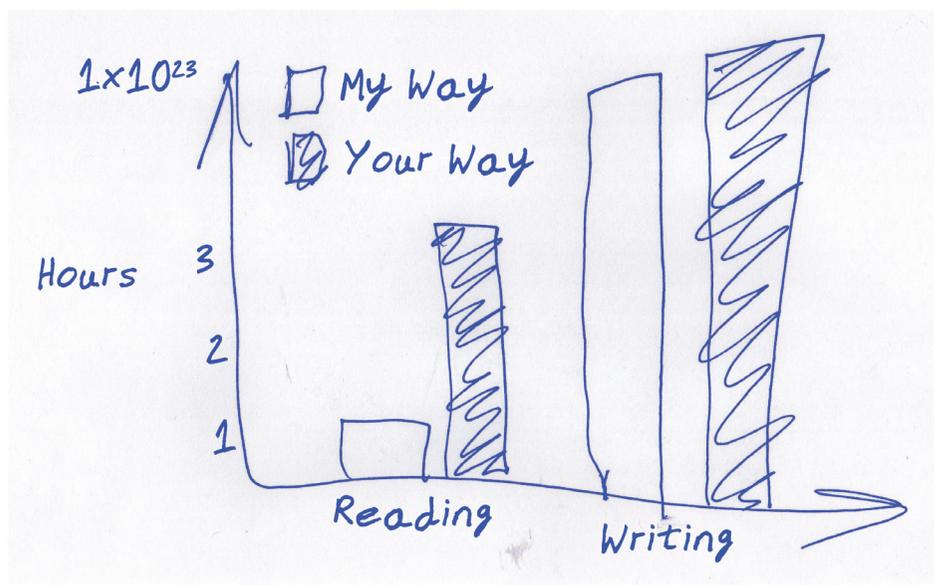
The Right Way to Use Cliff’s Notes

SparkNotes, CliffsNotes, and all of those other literary resources can be helpful, but only if you use them in the right way. They reduce a book down to the most important “clues” so that you can spot those clues while you’re reading the full text. But if you only read that basic overview, then how do you think you’re going to come up with enough specific quotes and meaty, well-supported ideas to write an essay? “Saving time” in your reading only leads to *wasting* time when you’re writing.

the poem was about. He needed to *really read* the poem.

Vikram was not a fan of this analysis. “I’ve read it already. I looked at it like 100 times. It’s not even in English!” Sure, Vikram may have read it corn-on-the-cob style. But if he took about thirty minutes to really dig in and Sherlock the poem, he would save himself about 2-3 hours during the writing process. Better yet, he would know exactly what he wanted to say, and he would never be stuck staring at the screen.

Vikram wasn’t convinced that Sherlocking would help. “No way. Look. Writing just takes me forever anyway. So if I spend even more time reading, I’ll never get it done! It’s like this.” (Vikram grabbed some printer paper and drew a very sophisticated bar graph to support his argument.)



Vikram was right that Sherlocking would make his reading take a bit more time at the outset, but he was in for a *huge* surprise in terms of how much easier the writing process would get. Writing essays may have taken him forever in the past, but it

definitely didn't have to. That's true for everyone. Anytime you're stuck and don't know what to say in an essay, then that's actually the perfect clue to tell you that you need a little Sherlock in your life. So let's go back to Vikram and his poem.

Vikram begrudgingly dug around in his backpack, produced a wad of paper, and smoothed it out for Katie to see. It was sonnet time. Katie asked him to start reading. "(Sigh... eye roll...ahem) My mistress' eyes..."

"...Are nothing like the sun? Ahhh, 'Sonnet 130.' A classic. I could've helped you with that, Vikram." Vikram's super-nerdy older brother, Parvesh, had entered the room, and Vikram had steam coming out of his ears.

"Parvesh, I will murder your face!!!!!" he screamed. Vikram then turned to Katie and calmly said, "Please tell him to leave."

Fortunately, Parvesh disappeared and it was time to continue. Knowing this was a sonnet, and that sonnets are usually about love, Vikram tried really hard to be done. He said, authoritatively, "It's about love. How...amazing love is and a pretty girl and stuff."

Katie didn't buy it. "Where in the poem do you see that, Vikram?" Vikram's conclusion was clear evidence of his belief that you can get through English class by making stuff up. In fact, reading comprehension is just as logical as science—that's why

OMG, Shkspr!

"What the heck, Shakespeare? Why couldn't you just talk in normal English instead of Shakespeare-speak?" Well, in his time and place, Shakespeare was speaking in normal English. His plays were written to be understood by the Queen and the peasants alike. So, he made sure that the jokes were common ones and that the language was totally normal for everyone at that time. He didn't make it hard; our language just evolved. Think about it: if you sent Shakespeare a text message, like "OMG! R&J = so L. J/K loved it. g2g," he would be beyond confused. He'd have to work pretty hard to make each piece of that text as obvious as "Eggs."

Sherlock's skills are key when it comes to literary analysis.

"Look, I don't get this. Can't you just tell me what it means and I'll write that?"

A familiar voice boomed from the kitchen: "I can hear you, and if you do that, I'll tell Mom and Dad!" Was Parvesh everywhere? Reluctantly, Vikram read through the poem.

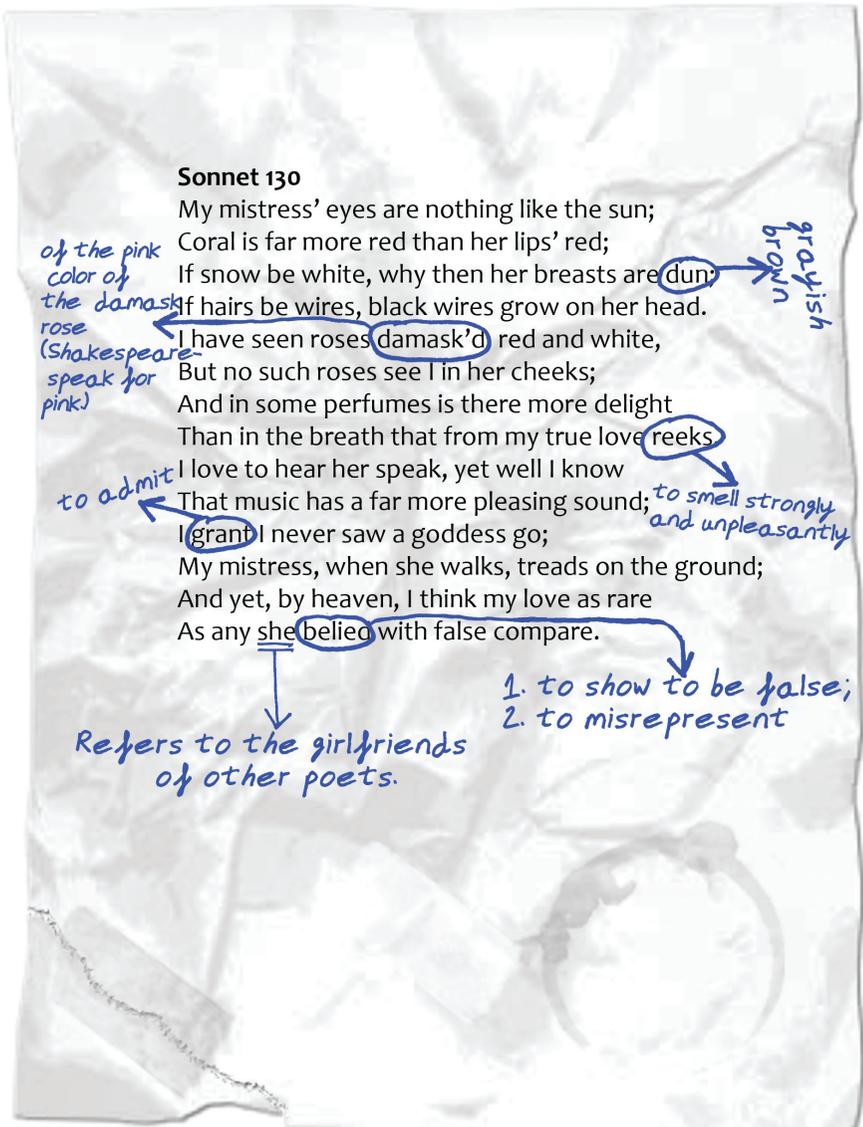
Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my true love reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music has a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground;
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

↓
*Refers to the girlfriends
of other poets.*

Before any Sherlocking could happen, Vikram needed to make sure Betty would approve of this poem. Vikram's note on the final line of the poem was a hint that his teacher had given to the class. So, it was already a bit clearer who the "she" was in that line. Next, Vikram went through the poem and made all of the unfamiliar words as obvious as "Eggs," so that he could be sure he had all of the facts lined up before he started to examine them.

SONNET 130: Obvious As "Eggs"



Then, just like Danielle did with her statistics, once he had finished with the dictionary, Vikram went through the sonnet, translating each line into his own words.

SONNET 130: The Vikram Remix

My girlfriend's eyes don't look like the sun
 Coral (Like fish? Whatever.) Coral is way redder than
 her lips...so her lips aren't red? Her lips are pasty?
 If snow is white, then her boobs are dull grayish brown (gross)
 And her hair is black and...something about wires.
 I've seen some nice pink, red, and white roses. 5
 But I don't see any of those colors in her cheeks.
 (So...her cheeks aren't rosy?)
 And in perfumes there is a much happier smell.
 Than the funky, rank breath that my girlfriend has.
 I like to hear her talk, but I know
 That music sounds way better.
 I'll admit I never saw a goddess walk around. (I still 10
 don't get why that matters.)
 My girlfriend walks on the floor. (Dunno...)
 But even with all this, I think she's as awesome and rare
 As any other poet's girlfriend who is...misrepresented
 with false comparisons.

By rewriting each individual line in a way that was Cake-Mix Clear, Vikram could concentrate on the *message* of Shakespeare's poem, as opposed to the scary Shakespeariness of how it was worded. It was at this point that Sherlock could take over. The importance of the last line was still mysterious, and Vikram had some questions earlier in the poem too. It was time to start investigating.

Step 1: Assess the clues. What Can You Say for Sure?

Sherlock Holmes doesn't act on any assumptions; he only

builds his case on cold, hard facts. So, Katie asked Vikram, “From what we have in the poem so far, what can we say *for sure*?”

Vikram snorted, “Her boobs are gray and her breath stinks.” Great! “Uh, no, that’s gross. I don’t get it. Why would he say that? Is the point that his girlfriend is ugly? Man, if I were that girl, I would totally break up with Shakespeare.” Exactly. Vikram could now see why it was dangerous to jump to that “it’s about a really pretty girl” conclusion earlier. All that he could say for sure was that Shakespeare is willing to talk smack about his girlfriend. Could he use that to get some insight into any of the other lines?

Not Just for Doodling

Making notes of definitions and new ideas may seem to take up too much time, but it’s nowhere near as much time as it takes to look up the same word over and over again. Bottom line? Yay, pens!

Katie and Vikram decided to start from the beginning. *My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.* Vikram’s first response was, “Duh! Eyeballs don’t look like the sun. The sun is yellow. And on fire.” True, true. But if Shakespeare is dissing his girlfriend, then why would he write this? “Well, I guess the sun is pretty and glowy.” Right! And that’s probably what you’d want someone’s eyes to be too. “But they’re not.” Exactly. What next?

“Ha! Her lips aren’t as red as coral, and red lips are hot, and so that means that her lips are also ugly.” OK, now he was getting somewhere.

Step 2: Look for Patterns Among the Clues

As Vikram went through the sonnet line by line, he noticed that the speaker establishes a pattern of talking about pretty things and then saying his girlfriend doesn’t have them. The speaker eventually changes that, but not until the end. When you’re reading anything in school—a poem, a play, or a novel—you

can bet that every word is there for a good reason. So, if Vikram's poem had fourteen lines, and twelve of them say that the poet's girlfriend isn't as pretty as a lot of other things, then it was safe to bet that that's an important idea.

My girlfriend's eyes don't look like the sun
 Coral (Like fish? Whatever.) Coral is way redder than
 her lips...so her lips aren't red? Her lips are pasty?
 If snow is white, then her boobs are dull grayish brown (gross)
 And her hair is black and...something about wires.
 I've seen some nice pink, red, and white roses.
 But I don't see any of those colors in her cheeks.
 (So...her cheeks aren't rosy?)

And in perfumes there is a much happier smell.
 Than the funky, rank breath that my girlfriend has
 I like to hear her talk, but I know
 That music sounds way better.
 I'll admit I never saw a goddess walk around. (I still
 don't get why that matters.)
 My girlfriend walks on the floor. (Dunno...)

But even with all this, I think she's as awesome and rare
 As any other poet's girlfriend who is...misrepresented
 with false comparisons.

WHAT???

She has grey boobs,
 rank breath,
 wire hair,
 pasty lips,
 her cheeks have
 no roses...

Shakespeare
 has an ugly
 gf!!!

Shakespeare
 spends twelve
 lines saying
 all the things
 his gf isn't
 as hot as...

Whenever you're reading any piece of literature, for English class or otherwise, if a word, phrase, or idea gets repeated, you can be sure that it's because the author REALLY wants you to notice it. Because this sonnet is so short, it is easy to see that repetition of ideas all in a row. But in a novel, you may see repeated words

or ideas or images appear once every few chapters or so. It's more spread out, but that's still a red flag that it's important. Noticing the repetition is the key to figuring out the main ideas or themes of any work. Sherlock Holmes operates in the same way. If a particular suspect is present every time a crime is committed, then he or she should definitely be a "person of interest." With enough appearances, it should become really obvious whodunit.

Pay attention to the fact that Vikram's process did not go in corn-on-the-cob order through the poem. After reading the poem one time, Vikram jumped around to make the different words in the passage as obvious as "eggs." Then he picked out the clues that would make the clearest and most helpful starting point, which in this case were the third and eighth lines of the poem. As Vikram went along, he filled in the information around those clues. At this point, he just had to secure whatever the final mysterious pieces were, no matter where they were in the poem. The main idea—the culprit—can be lurking anywhere in your reading. Great detectives never expect to work straight from beginning to end. It's about narrowing in on your suspect.

Step 3: Where are the Holes in my Theory?

Vikram had gotten down to the very core idea of the first twelve lines. But those final two were still confusing, because they definitely didn't seem to fit with the pattern of the poet just saying that his mistress isn't that hot. Here's what Vikram had to work with.

*My girlfriend isn't that hot. (Lines 1-12)
But even with all this, I think she's as awesome and rare
As any other poet's girlfriend who is...misrepresented with
false comparisons. (???)*

One thing that Vikram noticed was that these final lines start

with “but” (or “and yet” in the original). That was a sign that the lines contain some sort of message that’s going to change things up a bit. What’s more, after naming all these terrible things about his mistress, the poet says that he still thinks she’s “rare”...which is a good thing, like “wonderful” and “unique.” So, based on that, what could a reader tell? “We can tell that even though this girl looks kinda nasty, he still really loves her and appreciates her.” How sweet. Vikram had nailed it.

The real kicker was the final line, though. Why was this worth writing a poem about? “As any she belied with false compare.” Based on Vikram’s translation, Shakespeare is saying that other poets’ girlfriends are...“misrepresented” (belied) with false comparisons. So...they get compared to things, but those comparisons aren’t really true?

“Aaarrrrgghh! This is so stupid. Why can’t poets just say what they mean? If he thinks his girlfriend is busted...just say so!!!! This takes forever!” Vikram was frustrated, and what happened next didn’t help:

“Vikram, no need to yell. I’m happy to help you...” (Parvesh was back.)

“GET OUT OR I WILL END YOU!”

Vikram threw his eraser at Parvesh, who melodramatically said, “That really hurt. I will be telling Mom,” before leaving. With Parvesh gone, Vikram and Katie got back to work.

Okay, these other poets compare their girlfriends to things, but the comparisons aren’t really true. So, on the one hand, this guy is at least telling it straight about his girlfriend’s looks. The other poets exaggerate. The basic message would be a poem like this:

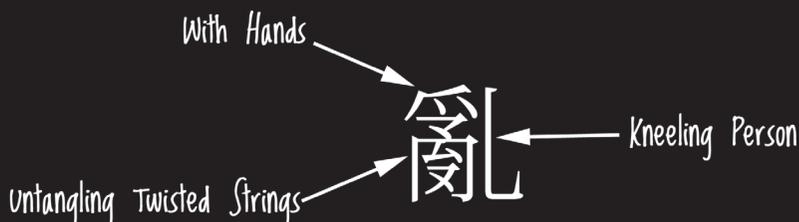
My girlfriend isn’t that hot,

*But I think she's just as awesome
As any other girl whose poet-boyfriend is probably exaggerating
about her anyway.*

Obviously, Shakespeare's version is a little more appealing and impressive than Vikram's final version. But by making the message this clear, it was starting to make more sense to Vikram why Shakespeare chose the specific comparisons and wording that he did in the first twelve lines. Think about it: all the qualities that his girlfriend doesn't have, like rosy cheeks and bright, twinkling eyes, are exactly the kinds of things that most poets would say their girlfriends *do* have. He's basically saying, "In your face, liars! No one's cheeks are *really* like roses, and no one's voice is *actually* like music. My girlfriend is human, and sometimes she has bad breath, but I still think she's great." It may not be exactly what his girlfriend wants to hear, but he's just telling the truth.

WHAT IS CONFUSION?

The Chinese character for confusion represents a man unraveling a ball of string. Centuries ago, people saw confusion as the perfectly normal process through which everyone goes when he or she is trying to get to an ideal end result.



But thanks to the conspiracy, our idea of confusion has changed. What do you associate with the feeling of confusion? Frustration? Helplessness? Most of us feel as if being confused means that we don't understand what we're working on... and there's very little chance that we ever will. In reality, confusion is an essential part of the process.

Step 4: How Does this Relate to Your Experience as a Human Being?

Sherlock's best technique for making sense of the clues is to really think about them in relation to how people behave. He is fascinated by what people do and why. After all, everybody's life is different, and yet there are some experiences that everyone goes through in some way.

The Key is the Couplet

All sonnets are fourteen-line poems. But Shakespearean sonnets have a very specific structure. The first twelve lines are the "setup." You can think of the final couplet—or pair of lines that rhyme with each other—as the "payoff." They take the setup and either turn it on its head or drive it home in some way. It's usually in the relationship between the setup and the payoff that you can find the real message.

That's important, because the reason that certain literary works become "classics" is that they talk about those universal emotional experiences that we all understand—things like the feeling of having your first crush. Vikram may not have used the word "belied" often, but he *did* live in the world, and he *was* a human being. Therefore, there were things that he knew to be true.

FACT: Most lovey-dovey poems just give a person compliments.

FACT: People do not appreciate hearing that their breath stinks.

FACT: Probably Shakespeare's girlfriend was pretty angry when she read this the first time.

FACT: It's nice to hear over-the-top compliments sometimes, but it's better to be loved for who you are.

FACT: Ultimately, Shakespeare's poem is weirdly romantic, because it's honest. He loves her even with her flaws.

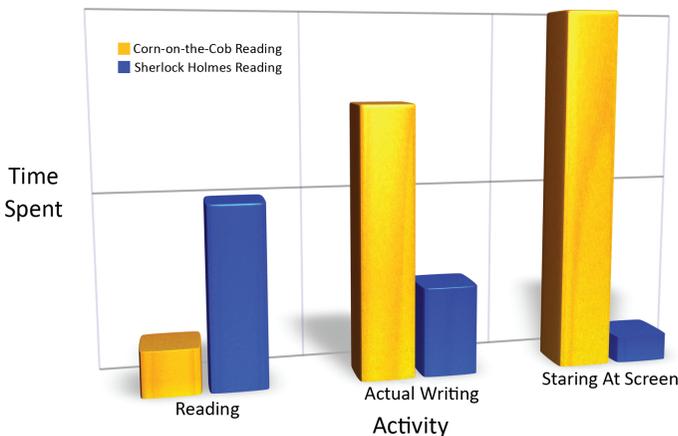
By this point, Vikram was starting to change his tune. "Okay. That's pretty cool. I get this. Shakespeare loved her, but he's funny about it." That's right—this is sort of like the anti-love-poem love

poem. And by putting this poem in the context of what Vikram already knew about life—he could finally see what made the poem worthwhile. Vikram looked down at the poem sheepishly. He had to admit, he was actually enjoying Shakespeare.

So, did Vikram just “make up” his conclusions about this sonnet? After all, that’s what he said all of the good English students were doing. Of course not! It only looks like people “make things up” when you don’t see the steps that are involved. English is a logical subject, just like any other. Vikram’s understanding came from doing actual investigation into the poem, so that every conclusion he drew was based on “facts” from the poem itself.

Because he did that investigation, Vikram could talk about what the poem is saying, and why it’s interesting that Shakespeare would not only dare to say his girlfriend isn’t hot, but would also be willing to call other poets exaggerators. He could talk about how Shakespeare’s approach to the “love poem” is way different from most poets’ approaches. He could talk about tons of things, because he finally had an *actual understanding* of what was going on in this reading. Not only did this half hour of reading time save him hours when he wrote the essay, but his essay would be much better too.

*Does Corn-on-the-Cob Reading
Actually Save You Time?*



Hark! It's Just Like Me!

Just like Vikram realized that he totally dug Shakespeare's underlying message, you might be surprised by how many of the "classics" you can really relate to. Look beyond the weird fashions and the antiquated slang, and you might find that the old-timey hero(ine) deals with the same problems and situations that you face.

For the purposes of writing his essay, Vikram now had a good enough understanding of the poem to get past his writer's block. Of course, Sherlock Holmes would not stop here; there is much more in this poem to discover. For instance, there are details of word choice that affect the tone and show what literary techniques Shakespeare was using. Perhaps learning more about Shakespeare's own life would bring more meaning to the poem.

There are always more questions to ask to better understand a mystery. The deeper you look into what you're reading, and the more you read in general, the more automatic your process will become. With enough practice, things like the meanings of words from Elizabethan English and the ability to recognize literary techniques will become automatic for you.

Vikram also thought that he should be able to understand the poem right away; when that didn't happen, he decided that investigating it at all was a waste of time. "Work" is annoying, but puzzles are fun to solve. By digging in and not worrying about how long the process took, Vikram went from hating Shakespeare to actually kind of enjoying it. Appreciation comes from understanding. The better you understand something, the more exciting it becomes, the more you will appreciate why it matters, and the more fun you'll have doing it.

Knowing The Motive Brings the Clues to Life

Sherlock's method for reading is awesome because it works on any passage in any subject, anytime and anywhere. Some of Sherlock's cases are like Vikram's Shakespeare sonnet; to any

other detective, they would seem inaccessible and impossible to solve. Sherlock knows that with enough investigation, he can make sense of even the most intimidating sets of clues.

But there is another kind of case that Sherlock is famous for cracking. It's the sneakiest type of case—the one that from the outside looks like there's not a case to be solved at all. Most detectives see the clues and think that they're perfectly normal and straightforward...and, in fact, boring. They find a reasonable explanation because the case seems to be open-and-shut. Nothing to investigate. But Sherlock is never satisfied until he understands *why* the suspect might have committed the crime. That insistence on understanding every aspect of the case is why he's always the only detective to catch the *real* criminal.

In “The Adventure of the Six Napoleons,” Sherlock is called to investigate a series of break-ins in which nothing is stolen. In fact, in each situation, only one thing is out of the ordinary: a statue of Napoleon has been destroyed. When Inspector Lestrade sees this evidence, he reaches a conclusion in record time. Obviously, someone just *really* hates Napoleon. Weird, but no big deal. Case closed, right? Not for Sherlock. Sherlock needs to know the criminal's *motive*; what's more, he needs to find a motive that is actually satisfying. In other words, he needs to believe that it would drive an actual, otherwise normal human being to commit a crime.

Think They O'er-do It?

One of the conventions of poetry that students find most off-putting is the use of accents and apostrophes to change words that would otherwise be simple. Why do poets write wand'ring and stained and even o'er? Most students think poets do this to be “fancy.” In reality, the poet is sort of cheating. Many poems have a rhythm that the poet commits to and then has to fulfill. If you can only have ten syllables per line, then changing “over” to “o'er” saves you a syllable of space and that can make a huge difference. This is a poet's way of bending the rules to maximize his poetic punch.

For Sherlock, hating a random historical figure from 84 years earlier is not enough reason for the average person to risk jail by breaking into shops and burgling people's homes. That would be like you becoming a burglar because you hate John Quincy Adams's face. There must be something more.

Indeed, as the case progresses, Sherlock discovers that these particular Napoleon statues all came from the same mold and one is rumored to contain a treasure. Now there's a more understandable motive. Most people wouldn't risk breaking into a shop just to be mad at Napoleon. But if it meant getting a treasure? That's more believable. By continuing to question the motive, Sherlock finds more clues that help him to solve the case.

The fun of being a detective is the investigation—seeing what other people wouldn't see. So when a case seems obvious, most detectives would get bored. Ugh. Nothing to find here. That's the other key mistake that a lot of students make with their reading. Textbook reading looks, on the surface, like there's not much to discover, and so students go full-Lestrade and treat it like an open-and-shut case. And this is especially true in history textbooks—the undisputed world champions of boring, straightforward factoids.

Sherlock Doesn't Discriminate

Just because Sherlock is a literary character doesn't mean he's only helpful for your English class. Sherlock's approach is the key to solving one of the most universally troublesome parts of math class: word problems. Most students corn-on-the-cob read their word problems and then throw down some Lestrade-like equation. Instead, just as Vikram took apart the sonnet, line by line, you need to take apart a word problem, line by line.

1) Figure out exactly what case you're trying to solve. If the word problem is about a bake sale, b =brownies is not the same as b =cost of brownies or b =number of brownies sold. 2) Separate the facts from the fluff. Search for the relevant clues, and ignore the fact that the bake sale was in support of the Rockingham County High School debate team. 3) Now that you've narrowed it down, figure out how the facts are related. 4) Use them to define and solve an equation. Word problems aren't harder, they just require an initial investigation to weed out the relevant clues.

Be honest. How often do you *really* do all of your history reading each night? Or better yet, how often do you *not* corn-on-the-cob it, whenever you do get around to reading it? “Blah, blah, blah Continental Congress...blah blah blah Winston Churchill...blah blah...wait, did I skip some? Whatever. Blah blah 1957...blah, blah Martin Luther King, Jr....blah blah blah invention of the internet... Done!” It’s a classic move to say, “This is just a million facts about dead people. It’s annoying, but if I just memorize them, I’ll be done.” That may get you through a quiz or two, but if you find history “boring” or “useless” then that means that you’re approaching your history class in the hardest way possible.

The problem isn’t that history is boring. The problem is that it’s wa-a-a-ay too interesting. On a practical level, consider this tidbit:

OF ALL THE TRILLIONS OF THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF MANKIND, THE FACTS IN YOUR HISTORY BOOK HAVE BEEN HAND-PICKED AS THE MOST WORTH LEARNING!!!

Entire civilizations have lived, day by day, for thousands of years. On each of those days, *every single person in every single civilization* did many, many things. And yet only 400 or so pages of events can make it into an average history textbook. So, if something gets an entire paragraph, page, or chapter in your book, you can assume that it’s *more important and interesting* than 99.9% of all things that have ever happened to any humans.

What’s more, even for the people and events that *do* make it into the textbooks, you’re NEVER getting the full story. That’s because history is extremely controversial. When it comes to historical events, people have strong opinions about who was right, who was at fault, and whether the actions were justifiable. As you can probably guess, those opinions rarely match up. What’s more, as you learned from the genius myths in Chapter

One, people have strong agendas when it comes to how the stories of their own lives and their accomplishments (or failures) are told. Basically, if you're a history textbook writer, you're wading into shark-infested waters. The only way to write a textbook that doesn't anger anyone—or everyone—is to stick to the facts and *only* the facts: the who, what, when, and where.

So what's the result of that? Well, having *just* the facts... is...boring! You're absolutely right to think that a bunch of straightforward facts is not fun to read. But you're *not* right to think that what's in your textbook is the entire extent of what you need in history class.

In history textbooks, the really interesting aspects—the *why* and the *how*—are missing. But it's the *how* and the *why* that make history SO UNBELIEVABLY MIND-BLOWING. History is seriously fascinating. But you have to investigate what's behind the facts in the text in order to find the motives that brought these events about. Those motives are what bring it all to life.

Nothing major has ever happened that wasn't

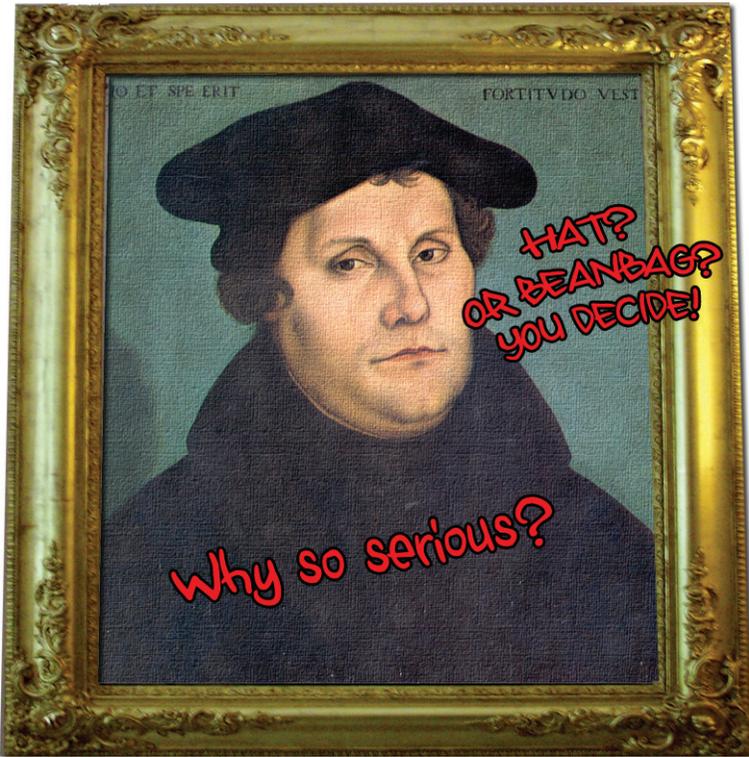
The Tutu Guru

Katie was once at the ballet in Los Angeles, sitting behind a father and his six-year-old daughter, who was sporting a very impressive tutu. When the father asked the daughter whether she was going to be okay sitting for the whole length of the ballet, she turned to him and very frankly said, "Dad. Only boring people get bored." Katie was blown away. Best. Advice. Ever. Take a hint from the six-year-old ballerina. If you're bored... whose fault is that?

fueled by intense emotions, high-stakes drama, big risks, and super-controversial actions. People have done some crazy things, but they do them for real reasons. Take the time to think about *why* the people in history did what they did—investigate the motive—and you'll have no trouble getting through that textbook.

To show you what happens when you apply Sherlock's method to your history reading, let's take a look at an excellently dry sample passage from a textbook. This particular passage is a great example, because the event

happened a really long time ago, which can make it feel like it's no longer relevant. Also, it was done by this guy:



That's Martin Luther. How much do you feel like you can identify with him? Already, this is a bit of a turn-off. But if you let yourself go Lestrade like that, it's easy to underestimate what a major deal this man really was.

67

CHAPTER 3: THE REFORMATION

In order to fund a rebuilding campaign for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Pope Leo X authorized the sale of plenary indulgences. A plenary indulgence was a piece of paper that Catholics could purchase in exchange for absolution from their sins. Martin Luther, a Catholic priest from Germany, was disturbed by this practice and on October 31st, 1517, he nailed 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg. These theses were a list of his concerns about the current state of the church and Luther's hope was that they would spark a debate. They did much more than that. Martin Luther was excommunicated, and the Reformation began.

Sixteenth Century Europe



It's Self-Explanatory

The word “history” actually comes from the Greek word *historein* meaning “to investigate.”

If you found your attention drifting during this passage, then chances are likely that you were doing some corn-on-the-cob reading. Most students would take away the superficial, just-the-facts conclusion.

“Some priest guy got mad, wrote a note to the Pope, and nailed it to a church door.” That’s true, but it certainly doesn’t sound like you’ve “solved” that case, does it?

What led to this event taking place? What were Martin Luther’s motives? Take the straight-up facts from your book and *find* the meaning, the significance, and the connections that show why this event mattered (and still matters) so much.

The passage, like most textbook passages, is pretty close to Cake-Mix Clear already. Let’s just make sure that every term passes the Eggs Test.

67

CHAPTER 3: THE REFORMATION

The biggest church ever built; home to the Pope

In order to fund a rebuilding campaign for St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, Pope Leo X authorized the sale of plenary indulgences. A plenary indulgence was a piece of paper that Catholics could purchase in exchange for absolution from their sins. Martin Luther, a Catholic priest from Germany, was disturbed by this practice and on October 31st, 1517, he nailed 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg. These theses were a list of his concerns about the current state of the church and Luther’s hope was that they would spark a debate. They did much more than that. Martin Luther was excommunicated and the Reformation began.

Forgiveness ←

Sixteenth Century Europe

To be formally kicked out of a church.

European Christians that established Protestantism as a recognized branch of Christianity.

**Step 1: Assess the Clues. What Can You Say For Sure?**

In history, this first step is usually very straightforward, because many of the surface facts are presented in a clear way. Now that everything in this passage is as obvious as “eggs,” you can take stock of what you know for sure.

1. The pope wants to raise money to build the biggest church ever.
2. To pay for that church, he lets people buy forgiveness for their sins.
3. Martin Luther thinks that's wrong.
4. He makes a list of things the church is doing wrong and nails it to the local church door.
5. He gets kicked out of the Church.
6. He starts a new branch of Christianity.

Step 2: Look for Patterns Among the Clues

Although you can appreciate that these events happened in this order, it's a very different thing to really understand the connections between those events and why each one caused the next.

The events that led to the Reformation started, in part, with Martin Luther getting angry at the Church. So let's examine why the Church made Luther so *upset* that he was willing to risk being excommunicated. Martin Luther thought it was wrong that the Church was selling plenary indulgences. Why? Why was that so bad? Well, think about it. Luther was a priest, and his whole life was dedicated to bringing himself and everyone else closer to God. But suddenly, plenary indulgences made it so that getting into heaven wasn't about faith, it was about money. You could just buy forgiveness coupons! Unsurprisingly, Martin Luther thought the Church was acting in a very shady fashion. So, he questioned the Pope's decision to sell indulgences and brought up a bunch of other things that he thought the Church was doing wrong.

So, now you understand why Martin Luther wrote his 95 theses. You get his motives. But, in order to really give the event a strong context, you also need to know what happened after, and as a result of it. Well, Martin Luther wanted to spark a debate within the Church. But there was no debate, and he got

excommunicated. At face value, that would seem like his plan backfired. Luther didn't get to stay in the Catholic Church and make it better. However, his actions still had an enormous effect, because they ultimately led to the Protestant Reformation—not a new version of the Catholic church, but a new church altogether.

Step 3: Where are the Holes in my Theory?

In history textbook reading, most sentences are pretty understandable at face value. But that doesn't mean that you have nothing to "fill in." It is almost impossible to understand or appreciate an historical event in isolation. If you want to know why an occurrence was fascinating, then ask the following questions:

What led up to this that made it a turning point? What did it take to make this happen?

What future events did this one make possible?

What was it like to live then? What were the conditions of the time?

It's important to understand what Europe was like back then. At that point, the Catholic Church had been the biggest, most powerful entity in Europe for hundreds and hundreds of years. *Everyone* in Europe was Catholic, and the Church could do whatever it wanted. Just to give you an idea of how serious this was, when Henry IV—the Holy Roman Emperor—was excommunicated, he crawled on his knees to beg the Pope to undo his excommunication. (When an Emperor gets on his knees to beg you for something, you're pretty powerful.) If the Catholic Church said the Earth was at the center of the solar system, then everybody said it was true. Almost nobody questioned the Church, because people believed that the Pope was "God's chosen representative on Earth." That meant that when the Pope said something, it was the same as if God said it.

And if you were living in Europe, you basically had no options. You were either Catholic or...no “or,” actually. You were Catholic. Whether you agreed with the Church’s ways or not, you just kept your mouth shut and dealt with it. If you didn’t, the authorities strapped you to a pole, surrounded you with twigs and set you on FIRE! Between the lack of options and the refusal of the Catholic Church to change, it’s no *wonder* that there were other people out there who were dissatisfied and wanted a new branch of Christianity. That condition was important for making the Reformation possible.

Now, let’s talk consequences. In order to understand why you still learn about this little note to the Pope, you have to investigate the fallout. What happened as a *result* of this action? What became of this Protestantism business? Why does the Reformation matter for future events? Well, the Reformation basically split Europe in two. Half of Europe stayed Catholic, and half of Europe became Protestant. This shift in religious practice alone was huge. But once people started to question the church, something major happened: they started questioning other things too. Although it’s unlikely that Martin Luther intended this, some historians have argued that the Protestant Reformation created a culture of questioning that played a major role in driving the Scientific Revolution.

What Would That Be Like?

Where do you find the why and the how? There are plenty of ways to look beyond the facts. You can find other books or articles, or even just do a simple Google search. Any extra information helps. You might find conflicting opinions or details, which is even better, because you can really puzzle it out. Then again, you can also get a lot closer to the motives just by actually thinking about what it says in your book. What does it really mean that 12 million people died in the Holocaust? Do you actually stop to picture how massive that is? Alternatively, what would it be like to feel so strongly about an idea that you’d risk your life over it? Or, what would it be like to actually fight in a war? Or to be in charge and have to make decisions about what happens to the soldiers? Sometimes, just by really focusing on a fact, it’s much easier to see how important and shocking it is.

Step 4: How Does this Relate to Your Experience as a Human Being?

Of course, Sherlock wouldn't stop at just learning the facts of the church door, the 95 theses, and the excommunication. Sherlock always wants to know what makes people tick, and investigating that aspect of an historical event is what will really help you to understand it—and to remember it. After all, history books are made up of only the *most* impressive feats...people facing the *biggest* challenges and taking the *boldest* actions. So what you want to ask yourself in the final step is, "Why was this a high-stakes move for this particular person?" In other words, what did it take for Martin Luther to do what he did? What was he up against, and why was his action so extraordinary?

So let's put ourselves in Martin Luther's shoes. You've sacrificed your entire life to serving the church as a priest. Little by little, you notice things that the Church is doing that you don't think are quite right. They pile up, but you stay true to your commitment to the Church and try to look the other way. But once the sale of plenary indulgences begins, you just can't take it anymore. You feel like you've got to do something, but what are you going to do? You know what happens to people who challenge the Pope's authority. (They get set on fire.) But you feel so unbelievably strongly about these issues that you go ahead anyway and nail a note to what is essentially *God's door*. Clearly, you know you're not exactly going to get a thank you card for doing this. Martin Luther knew he was taking a huge risk, but he knew it was something he *had* to do.

When you look at Luther's 95 Theses from that perspective, you can get a whole new level of appreciation for what he did and why it was a very, very high-stakes move. He risked a lot, but for him the reward was big too: he eventually got a church in which he could really believe.

And how does that help you today? After Martin Luther's move, for the first time, people in Europe could openly disagree, debate, and question. The intellectual shackles had been taken off. This condition played a major role in the exponential growth in technology, art, and science that happened in the wake of that explosion. Thanks in part to that little note to the Pope, you're not a peasant, you don't worry about the Plague, and you don't empty your toilet onto the sidewalk. Thanks, Martin Luther!

With Sherlock's skills, you can see beyond the surface facts and piece together the full story of things that happened in the past. And when you start doing this, history is no longer just a class where you have to memorize a million separate stupid little details about stuff that has already happened. Instead, by really understanding your reading, you can also see why the things you learn about in history class are hugely important, and why people really are as fascinating as Sherlock thinks they are. The goal of history class is not to learn history but to learn *from* history. Just like studying literature, studying history gives us a way to better understand ourselves. History allows us all to learn and question the choices that people made in the past, so that we can see why our world is in the position that it is today. The more Sherlocking that everyone does, the better chance we all have of making sure that we don't repeat the mistakes of past generations. Only by understanding how we got here can we figure out how to get where we hope to be.

Are You Sherlock Holmes or Inspector Lestrade?

There are two ways to approach your reading. Most students choose the Inspector Lestrade route. Because there's no actual method to his investigation, he ends up running around in circles and jumping to conclusions that get him no closer to an arrest. His "process" is also stressful, because he doesn't really know what he's doing. In the same way, students corn-on-the-

cob their reading, try to guess at the real meaning of the text, and then jump to writing an essay. That's just asking for extra hours of being stuck in the writing process with nothing to say. What's more, those students never get to feel like the case is closed, because they never reach some exciting or interesting conclusion about what they read. Lestrade's method of taking the surface explanation *seems* faster, but in the end, it takes more time and is far less satisfying and successful.

And then there's the Sherlock way. We've given you a taste of what Sherlock's method can really do. Sherlock's method may seem, at first, to take longer; after all, it does require more patience and more attention to detail...and even some research. But Sherlocking your reading sets you up to save a ton of time

A Distinct Advantage

The more reading you've Sherlocked in your life, the faster you'll be at finding mind-blowing connections when you read something new. For example, if you've Sherlocked your history up to Martin Luther, then you'd know he wasn't the first person to attempt this kind of reform. But you'd also be able to spot why he was the most successful: he lived in the age of the printing press. Before Luther's time, if you wanted to change the way people thought, you had to rely on hand-copied documents or word of mouth. Thanks to the printing press, just eight years after he first posted his 95 Theses, Luther and his supporters had flooded Europe with three million pamphlets and books.

on all of the essays and tests that come after that reading. Writer's block won't be an issue, and everything you read will be more memorable. That means less time studying for your tests and less stress while you're taking them.

Best of all, Sherlocking your reading will make every single class more interesting. Sherlock Holmes is never bored. Already, as a high schooler, you're essentially being handed a Greatest Hits playlist of the best literature and the most meaningful historical events. All you have to do is investigate why what you're studying made the cut. Appreciation comes from understanding.

By approaching your reading like Sherlock would, you can guarantee that the seconds never drag by on the clock; your work will breeze by, and you won't be able to *help* but find it fascinating. So, Sherlock or Lestrade? Well, my dear friend, the choice is elementary.

Getting the Ball Rolling

Depending on your level of familiarity with the text, Sherlocking your reading can take a little while or no time at all. Even if you don't feel ready to dig into a passage as much as we have above, the best place to begin is by catching yourself in the act of corn-on-the-cob reading. Pay attention and stop yourself whenever you get into that left-to-right rhythm. It may be once every couple of sentences, once per paragraph, or once per page, but if you start to pay attention to *how* you read, you'll get more out of *what* you read.