In *Philosophical Investigations* there is an extended discussion of reading, at the beginning of which he writes (§ 156):

The use of [the word ‘reading’] in the circumstances of our ordinary life is of course extremely familiar to us. But the part the word plays in our life, and so too the language-game in which we employ it, would be difficult to describe even in rough outline. A person, let’s say an Englishman, has received at school or at home one of the kinds of instruction usual among us, and in the course of it has learned to read his native language. Later he reads books, letters, newspapers, and so forth.

Now what goes on when, say, he reads a newspaper? — His eye passes — as we say — along the printed words, he says them out loud — or only to himself; that is, he reads certain words by taking in their printed shapes as wholes; others when his eye has taken in the first syllables; others again he reads syllable by syllable, and an occasional one perhaps letter by letter. — We would also say that he had read a sentence if he spoke neither aloud nor to himself during the reading, but was afterwards able to repeat the sentence word for word or nearly so. — He may attend to what he reads, or again — as we might put it — function as a mere reading-machine: I mean, read aloud and correctly without attending to what he is reading; perhaps with his attention on something quite different (so that he is unable to say what he has been reading if he is asked about it immediately afterwards). ...

The experience Wittgenstein is invoking here can also occur when we are reading quietly by ourselves (a novel, a philosophy book, or whatever): it may suddenly strike us that, for a page and a half, we have not really known what we were reading. We failed to do what we meant to be doing. We decide we have to go back and read the text over again. Usually we are able to find the spot where our thoughts trailed off.
What is it, the absence of which we notice here? Reading, as Wittgenstein suggests, can be regarded from two different perspectives: on the one hand, we may think of it as the application of a more or less mechanical skill, and on the other hand we may think of it as something involving comprehension. The failure to comprehend what one is reading may be due to a lack of ability or a failure of attention.

Learning to read, as I recall it, happened something like this: I had been taught to combine letters with sounds, and then, having been asked to read something, I would follow the text from left to right, producing a sound for each letter; at the same time, I would attend to the sounds I had made, and try to make out what word or sentence they made up. I remember finding the process a rather cumbersome groping at first. What was initially a matter of guessing gradually became more assured. After a while I could cut out the sounds, simply hear them in my mind’s ear, as it were, or not be clearly aware of any sounds at all.

I would imagine this experience is shared, more or less, by those of us who have learnt to read in an alphabetized language\(^1\). (Among these I include English, which could perhaps be considered semi-alphabetized.) The central point here is that learning to read happens in the midst of language. We learn to read by latching this skill onto the language we speak and understand.

What characterizes an alphabetized language is that the form of writing is clearly separated, as it were abstracted, from the content. This explains why I can read without attending to what I read. It also explains why, having mastered some rudimentary rules of pronunciation I could read out a sentence in, say, Hungarian, of which I have no understanding, in such a way that a Hungarian speaker would

\(^{1}\) A friend of mine told me he went through the process as it were in reverse: he would sit in his mother’s lap, listening to her read out a comic book, and thus learning to connect sounds with marks. cp learning to write
know what it says. I may also copy out a written text without knowing or thinking of what the text says. It is for similar reasons I may have the experience of having read a text, silently or out loud, without having taken in what it says.

Reading Chinese, for instance, must be a wholly different experience, for I imagine that in the case of Chinese one has to grasp what is being said before knowing how to enunciate it. You cannot learn to read Chinese by learning rules of pronunciation, however elaborate. Because of this, I would argue, there is no such thing as reading Chinese while not being aware of what you are reading. (This is a point of logic.) I would imagine something similar is true of the way deaf children who use sign language learn to read. In both cases, the way reading latches on to language use must be radically different from what it is in the case of alphabetized voice languages. I mention these points simply to remind us that the way reading appears to Western hearing readers may largely be shaped by the contingencies of our own culture.

What, then, distinguishes reading attentively from reading mechanically? I think in reflecting on this question we are torn in two directions. On the one hand, it seems to us that the difference has to lie in some activity or process occurring at the time of reading or listening. On the other hand, it seems that the difference has to lie in the end result: our having read or listened attentively will show itself in our ability to give an adequate account of what we have read or heard.

There are two circumstances that make the idea of a concurrent process or activity attractive. One is that it appears to anchor the attentiveness at the time of the reading itself. It is our experience of this process or activity, it seems, that enables us to tell whether we have been reading attentively or not. We do not have to wait and see whether we have retained anything in order to decide that we have managed to
attend to what we were reading. (As I shall argue later, this claim is not so unproblematic as it may seem.)

The second circumstance which makes this view attractive is that some process or activity seems to be required to account for what is involved in being able to read and understand a text. Like the Hungarian speaker, let’s call her Marta, I may be able to read the Hungarian text out loud (of course my reading will be deficient since I do not understand what I am reading). Unlike Marta, however, I will get nothing, or next to nothing, out of the reading. Evidently, this must be because we do not have the same cognitive equipment. Marta, it appears, is able to bring her linguistic knowledge to bear on the text, which is something I am unable to do. Evidently, this is what she is busy doing when she reads or hears the Hungarian text with understanding. And this, on the other hand, is what she fails to do if she does not listen attentively to my reading.

Of course Marta is not, normally, aware of doing any such thing. But that, it will be retorted, is simply because she is so fluent in her own language. The process or activity has become subliminal (just like the production of sounds while I read to myself). To be able to imagine what the process is like, it will be suggested, we should think of how we go about trying to understand a text in a language we are learning. This is hardly helpful, however. When trying to read a sentence in an unfamiliar language, we will normally draw on things we have learnt about the language, things that have been conveyed to us in our own (or some other familiar) language. I may try to recall the equivalents of the unfamiliar words and idioms in my native language, or the rules of grammar (why is this word in the accusative form? what does this word order betoken?), rules that, again, I have probably learnt in my own language. When I get more fluent, I may simply translate the sentence into my own language without consulting rules or lexical equivalences (later on, of course, I will read the text straight away without having to think of the translation).
When Marta is reading a sentence in her native Hungarian, on the other hand, she is not (normally) drawing on her knowledge of Hungarian vocabulary and grammar in a similar way, whether consciously or subliminally. Nor is she translating the sentence into any language. The idea that that is how native speakers are able to understand texts in their own language would of course lead to an infinite regress.

Be that as it may, however, the idea that some process of comprehension must take place is hard to get rid of. Whatever its nature, we are drawn to a picture of comprehension as based on some cognitively structured process, enabling us to use our knowledge of the language in order to get at the meaning of a text. We assume the existence of a procedure such that anyone in command of the language will arrive at the same result. Since we are unable to spell out what the process is like, we resort to the idea of a subliminal process. This is a sleight of hand, however, for since we could not spell out what the process would consist in if it were conscious, assuming it to happen unconsciously does not really advance our understanding. As Wittgenstein puts it (Philosophical Investigations § 308): “We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Some time perhaps we’ll know more about them – we think.” /Fodor mentalese/

I wish to argue, however, that the idea of any such procedure is a chimera, since no procedure could fulfil the demands it would be required to fulfil. Before doing so, I suggest we take a closer look at the familiar experiences with which we began. In fact, focusing on the reader’s experience in trying to get clear about the distinction between reading with and without attention is apt to lead us astray. At the end of the day, whether someone did or did not read attentively is not a matter of what she was experiencing at the time of reading, but whether in some way or other she is able to give an account of the text or show herself to be aware of its contents in some other way. We can imagine someone who has the experience of having read attentively, yet is unable to comment on what she had been reading right afterwards. And vice
versa. (We could also imagine people who have no familiarity with the experience of reading attentively or inattentively.) These possibilities are not as bizarre as they may appear. In fact, the distinction between reading with and without attention is rather a matter of degree. Even when my thoughts are wandering during the reading, I may notice misprints and malapropisms, I would notice if the language changes, I may even be struck by a surprising thought, as when a predictable philosopher suddenly says something unexpected. Also, although I might not be able to relate the contents, I would probably be able to answer questions in the negative ("No, I’m sure there was no mention of turtles in this passage"). In short, I do not read like a reading machine, as Wittgenstein suggests. On the other hand, rereading a text that I read just a moment ago with what I would have thought of as total attention, I may discover to my surprise that it contained important matters that I had failed to notice. Or some backward reference in the text may alert me to the fact that there was something I had missed. On the whole, the attentiveness of my reading is not an all-or-nothing affair, rather the quality of my attention may waver over a continuum.

All of this suggests that the difference between reading attentively and reading inattentively is quite different from what we are inclined to think. It is tempting to think of attention as something like a light beam: what is lit up by the beam is accessible to my awareness, the rest is beyond the reach of my vision. This is connected with the fact that we tend to regard the sphere of our attention, as we do our field of vision, as made up of objects. In both cases, it would be more accurate to think of them as made up of facts. This opens up for the possibility that we may be attentive to one and the same thing in one respect but not in another. ²

What attracts us to the light beam picture of attention, in turn, as I suggested, is our focusing on the first person case. (As so frequently in philosophy, restricting our

² I should like to note in passing that the concept of attention has been given far too little attention in English-speaking philosophy (Ryle being one exception). The picture of attention as a light beam lighting up objects makes it hard to see how I may be responsible for being or failing to be attentive to something; how my attentiveness may be an expression of my character.
attention to the first person case makes the phenomena appear more intractable than they really are.) Because we focus on the first person case, we tend to identify our attentiveness at a given moment with what we are experiencing at that moment. In consequence, we fail to recognize the possibility that me may be attentive to things in various respects. What needs to be acknowledged, in short, is the somewhat paradoxical-sounding point that we do not possess complete first person authority with regard to our own attentiveness.

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My suggestion, then, is that to get a clear grip on what it is to read attentively, we should focus on the results of the reading process, not on the experiences or processes accompanying it. What are the criteria of having read attentively?

The following account, described (though not endorsed) by the Swedish literary scholar Anders Pettersson might be thought to provide a plausible understanding of attentive reading:

A common idea of linguistic communication ascribes the decisive role in the communication process to the language system, the communicative code. I am thinking of the view that the sender encodes what she wishes to say in accordance with the rules of the language, known both to her and the addressee, thus making the coded message accessible to the addressee, who decodes it by applying the same code backwards, as it were. What determines the meaning of a sentence is linguistic and communicative convention, the “public conventions of usage” as
Monroe C. Beardsley states in his well-known argument for this standpoint... ³

Now, I would argue that this account is problematic for two different reasons. For one thing, it seems to run together the question of what it means to take in what a text says with the question of how we are able to do so. The first question, I am suggesting, is logical, and this is the question that concerns me here. The second question is evidently psychological, and has to be approached through empirical investigation. Of course, learning to read is a complex process, and there is no reason to assume, a priori, that the process is the same for different individuals, or even for different kinds of text in the case of a single individual. ⁴ So it would evidently be a mistake to assume that it can be subsumed under a single description. ⁵

However, considering the first question, the account, I would argue, is problematic because it treats different cases of communication as if they were all the same. If given a suitable reading, this account may be taken to fit certain forms of written communication very well, but there are other forms to which it is not at all well suited. Most importantly, as I shall be arguing later on, it does not give a good

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³ Verbal Art: A Philosophy of Literature and Literary Expression p. 86.
⁴ Pettersson himself favours a view of communication that brings together elements of conventionalism, intentionalism and a reader response account (p. 90). I am at one with him in as far as I too would argue that there is something adequate in each of these accounts. However, I differ from him in suggesting, as will be evident, that the account to be given varies depending on the particular context of communication. It also appears to me that Pettersson does not distinguish between the logical and the psychological issue concerning reading.
⁵ In fact, it should be evident that an account of how we learn to read must fulfil quite particular requirements. To make this clear, let us think of a case in which the problem I have in mind can be more easily seen: the case of learning to count. What would constitute an explanation, say, of how we learn to do addition? The explanation would have to cover those and only those cases in which we carry out the addition correctly. But this seems a rather fantastic requirement! Most of us who have been taught to do addition will make an occasional mistake. This means that whatever process is being activated in that case will not count as an application of the ability to do addition. It seems clear that, whatever the nature of the explanation, no single account will do for our ability to count. Perhaps we should say: the ability to count is not one that we possess. Evidently, since the question what it means to read with understanding is more indeterminate, this will be even more true for learning to read.
understanding of the questions that arise when it comes to the reading of literary texts.

Think of some cases:

(1) I read an official announcement of a compulsory auction in the town hall next Tuesday in the local newspaper.

(2) I come home and detect a note on the living room table: “Don’t forget your appointment at 4”. I recognize the handwriting of my significant other, and I am immediately reminded that I have a dentist’s appointment at 4 p.m. today.

(3) I am jotting down some notes in the course of sketching out a paper I am planning to write.

It is clear that in the first case, we find it important that the announcement should fulfil the demands of linguistic conventionality. Members of the public would have a right to complain if the announcement were worded in such a way that uncertainty might arise concerning the time and the place of the auction. It should ideally be such that a normal speaker of the language could interpret it without problem. (This is the ideal. I am setting aside the well-known fact that authorities will in many cases favour a kind of legalese that, while formally impeccable, is not actually transparent to the average citizen. There is a seeming paradox in the fact that, under the pretext of producing a text that does not admit of misunderstanding, one will actually produce one that can hardly be understood.) In the case of the note from my partner, on the other hand, it would be perverse of me to complain that she did not follow linguistic conventions. If I had a complaint, it would have to be framed in terms of our mutual relation and our habits of communication. In the case of my own notes, if long

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6 What, come to think of it, are linguistic conventions? It should be clear for one thing that what we recognize as according with convention depends on our understanding of a text, not vice versa. I have discussed this issue in “How Do Sentences Do it?”, http://web.abo.fi/fak/hf/filosofi/Staff/ihertzbe/Text/sentences.pdf.

7 Analogous considerations hold for academic prose.
enough time has passed since I wrote them I may fail to decipher them; hence if I wish to be able to make use of them later on, it may be advisable for me to use fairly conventional forms of expression; however, logically speaking, the only thing that matters is whether I am able to make them out.

What these examples bring out is that there is not one single answer to the question of what is there to be read in a text. Rather, the question takes on a different character in different types of situation. Furthermore, the role of linguistic conventions varies depending on the character of the question. In the type of impersonal communication instantiated by the official announcement, the question of what the text says is bound up with a question of rights, where these are ultimately to be settled by reference to linguistic conventions. Here language is a public matter. In the communication between my partner and me there may be a question of rights but conventions hardly play a role, it is all a matter between her and me; the note has served its purpose and can be discarded once I have read and understood it. In the case of my own notes, there is no question of rights; conventions have no logical role but they may be of practical importance.

Now, suppose someone else comes across my partner’s note. Maybe I am under FBI surveillance as a potential spy for North Korea. The FBI agent may try to figure out what the note is about: with whom do I have an appointment? Am I going to see my dentist? (Maybe he suspects that I will try to relay a message to the North Koreans on my way to the dentist, and he wants to intercept it, or catch me in the act.) Whatever the agent’s purpose, his relation to the message is subservient to that of my partner and me. For him to get it right is for him to achieve the understanding I share with the writer of the note. Obviously, he has no linguistic rights in this case. His job will be easier the more conventional the form of expression my partner uses, but he is in no position to complain if it is unconventional. (Something similar is true in the case
The notion of establishing what a text means as a matter of applying conventions ignores the way variations in “the addressee situation” bear on the question. My partner’s note or my own private notes have a determinate addressee, whereas the public announcement is responsible to what might be called a range of conditional addressees: to all those who have a legitimate interest in finding out where the auction is held. On the other hand, the FBI agent spying on my activities is outside the addressee relation. So is someone who goes through my private notes, or, say, a historian or anthropologist studying the official announcement in the newspaper. To them, the question of what the text says has to be approached through the question of what it means to its addressees.⁸

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The question I wish to consider very briefly in conclusion is what light may be thrown on the reading of literary texts by the examples we have been considering. What is the addressee situation with regard to a literary (or, for that matter, a philosophical) text? Suppose I read a Shakespeare play or a Platonic dialogue. Am I

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⁸ Consideration of these types of case is also important, I would argue, as a way of forestalling another way in which we may be tempted to construe the meaning of texts. There is a strong inclination to emphasize the writer’s intentions, his or her state of mind, in connection with the interpretation of texts (an inclination that has been criticized, where literary texts are concerned, in Beardsley and Wimsatt’s famous rejection of the so called intentionalist fallacy). This inclination, it might be suggested, is due to an inclination to assimilate explanations of meaning with the explanation of why something happens. A common form for the explanation of events is to give the background history of what happened, the chain of events leading up to the outcome that interests us. Taking up this perspective means regarding texts as symptoms of their writers’ state of mind rather than acts of communication. This perspective, in a sense, is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the conventionalist view, but just like that view, it suffers from the presupposition that all cases of reading can be treated along the same lines. It is true that our primary interest in reading a text might be to find out what mood the writer is in. Our interest then would not primarily concern what the text says. We should, as it were, be placing ourselves outside the addressee situation. This case is unlike one in which someone is trying to tell me how she feels.
one of Shakespeare’s or Plato’s addressees? There is an important sense, I would argue, in which the question has no determinate answer. We may be inclined to say that a writer, in composing, must have had a particular, contemporary audience in mind. Of course, considering the question from a psychological point of view, there is some truth to this. For instance, in choosing his allusions he did not worry whether they would be understand by an audience half a millennium later. This is the perspective largely adopted by Shakespeare scholars: in trying to get clear about some obscure allusion, they will primarily be asking themselves what it must have meant to Shakespeare’s contemporaries. In this regard, then, they are somewhat in the same logical predicament as the FBI agent described above. (A connected issue concerns the idea of the implicit reader in literary theory: the kind of reader at which, to judge by the text itself, the author was aiming.)

But even though, in Shakespeare’s case, there are reasons to believe that a very specific context played a role for his composing – his fellow actors at the Globe Theatre, his customary audience – there is an obvious sense in which Shakespeare’s addressees did not delimit themselves to his contemporaries. For a text to have a determinate addressee means for it to have fulfilled its function once that party has read and understood it in some relevant way, the way my partner’s note has done its job and can be discarded as soon as I have taken in the message. But it would be absurd to suggest that we could indicate some specific audience, the response of which would constitute the fulfilment of Shakespeare’s ambitions in writing, say, Hamlet. Of course, there are literary works that have come about with some specific goal in mind; one might think, for instance, of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four with its aim of warning of communism; however, it testifies to the literary quality of such a work that it may continue to speak to us even when the specific threat of communism is a matter of the past.⁹

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⁹ For an example to the contrary, we might think of Chernyshevsky’s What is to be Done?
Who, then, are Shakespeare’s, or Plato’s, or Orwell’s addressees? The point I wish to make is that there is no determinate answer to this question. We may think that it may be settled by determining whom Shakespeare had in mind, but then the question arises what it means to have someone in mind. Contemporary life is certainly beyond Shakespeare’s imagination; he could not have aimed at writing in such a way that Europeans at the beginning of the 21st century would be able to understand him – but then neither could he have meant to exclude them. Putting the point somewhat romantically, we might say that each one of us will make herself Shakespeare’s addressee in finding that his work speaks to us.

To the extent to which the addressee situation with regard to a written text is indeterminate, however, it would seem that the question of what the text says will also be indeterminate. In other words, no closed procedure seems to be available for establishing the sense of the text. Thus, considering literary texts from the addressee point of view seems to justify our conviction that there can be no fixed method for determining what a text says. From the perspective of what constitutes attentive reading, this seems to mean that what may call for our attention in reading a literary text is wide open.

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10 Writers have, at times, speculated about their prospective audiences. Julian Barnes has some amusing reflections on his last reader, in his book Nothing to Be Frightened of (Vintage 2009). Among other things, he heaps indignation on his last reader for, being the last, he or she has failed to awaken other people’s interest in Barnes’s work.

11 In fact, the literary scholar, too, will in a sense start out as Shakespeare’s addressee. It is against the background of a text that speaks to us that certain passages may stand out as being in need of historical illumination. – On the other hand, of course, a note which originally had a very specific function may come to speak to a latter-day reader. Consider, e.g., the graffiti in Pompeii. Also, Strindberg’s short story “Ett halvt ark papper” [Half a sheet of paper].