

The Difficulty Curve

ULYSSES PROJECT · DIMENSION 11 · TYPE III, CASE STUDY · THE PDF REGISTER

DIMENSION 11 · TYPE III, CASE STUDY · THE UNIT: THE LOGGED QUESTION

This is a study of one reader: $n = 1$, an accompanied first cover-to-cover read of *Ulysses*, with every question asked along the way recorded verbatim, dictation slips included. Nothing here generalises. That is the point: the famous claims about where readers break rest on even less.

The primary record is the project's 117-page Reading Companion — sixteen dated exchanges, 8–17 July 2026, inside a reading of 7–17 July. From it, 245 questions could be placed against the book's eighteen episodes (290 were extracted in all; the placement rules and their costs are in the caveats, which are part of this document, not an appendix). Episode titles are schema scaffolding, not Joyce's — he printed none.

$n = 1$, and it is stated here rather than footnoted (anchor A10). This is one reader, one edition, one accompanied first read of *Ulysses* — 7–17 July 2026, Penguin Modern Classics with the Declan Kiberd introduction, sixteen logged exchanges. Nothing in this document generalises to any other reader, and the caveats at the end are part of the document, not an apology appended to it.

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This is the PDF register of dimension 11 – one of four registers the dimension budgets. Its companion HTML edition, which carries the same material with the chart interactive, is at hulkiokantabak.github.io/ulysses/dimensions/difficulty-curve/. The reading record this is built from is at hulkiokantabak.github.io/ulysses/reading/companion/.

What the questions were made of

Every question logged during the reading, sorted by what kind of difficulty it represents. These nine kinds are the dimension's analytic output — and they are the prompts of dimension 15, the Reading Log, which is what anchor A15 required of them.

Kind (count)	What it is	In the reader's words
Plot and orientation tracking (48)	Losing or checking the thread of story, chronology, family relations, backstory delivered obliquely, and episode boundaries — including the standing end-of-exchange orientation requests ('help me understand... what awaits me') that were this reader's declared method of getting through the book.	"I'm trying to understand: is Milly the wife of Leopold Bloom, or the daughter? Who is marrying whom?" PDF p.10
Allusion and period reference (47)	Unrecognized references arriving unglossed: half-remembered songs, Shakespeare, Irish history and politics, Dublin places and institutions, 1904 objects and customs — the single largest difficulty class in the first half of the read.	"While I praised specificity before, this level of specificity and time detail is making reading the story and understanding it 100 years later very tough." PDF p.17
Style and form shifts (41)	Each episode's new technique asked about on arrival — mock headlines, fugue prose, gigantism parodies, the history-of-English strata, playscript hallucination, catechism, the unpunctuated stream — plus section breaks, list devices, and nonsense language.	"What are those sounds? How are these words created? There is also a mention of Miss Kennedy and Miss Douce. Who are these characters? What are we reading, and what chapter is this?" PDF p.31
Vocabulary and wordplay (25)	Single words, idioms, slang, and puns needing a gloss — from 'public house' and 'cavalcade' to 'ribaldry,' 'shithbreeches,' 'halcyon days,' 'apropos,' and 'when the maggot takes him.'	"Words that are tough: what does 'ribaldry' mean? And 'licentious'? I have an idea. What are we talking about here?" PDF p.55
Voice and referent confusion (22)	Not knowing who is speaking or who is meant: interior monologue read as spoken dialogue, lines misattributed to the wrong character, half-asleep memory dissolves, and above all Molly's slippery unpunctuated pronouns in Penelope (7 of its 38 questions).	"Who is she talking about? I just don't get it." PDF p.110
Tone, stance, and significance (15)	Uncertainty about attitude and weight: is Joyce (or Bloom) critical or affirmative, is a passage sarcastic, is a detail a planted symbol or 'just a random choice,' is this a joke or serious — including the reader's own false pattern-matches offered for testing.	"That is a very strong reference to the Church being strong, but I wonder if it's affirmative on his part or critical." PDF p.10
Felt but not grasped (6)	The reader's signature strain: the music of a passage received while its logic withholds — beauty registered, meaning asked for wholesale. Undercounted at 6 primary assignments because its signature sentences usually wrap questions filed under other strains, and it recurs in state signals from Wandering Rocks to Ithaca.	"This is all telling things I'm trying to understand. I get the feeling, but I don't get the main logic out of it." PDF p.31
Dictation and transcription noise (6)	Difficulty manufactured by the recording medium itself, kept as spoken per anchor A6: garbled names, pages, and quotes ('hate speech' for Hades, 'Lenin' for a swindler, 'unification' for micturition) that the answers had to decode before they could decode Joyce.	"Okay, let's test the recording like this. Now we're reading more into the hate speech, and can you record properly?" PDF p.14

Kind (count)	What it is	In the reader's words
Curiosity and delight (not difficulty) (42)	Not difficulty — kept visible because the curve has valleys: questions asked from pleasure, motif-spotting, and the reader's own readings offered for confirmation. Delight is the most common non-difficulty state in the record, densest in Penelope (12 of 38 questions) and around every episode ending.	"What a fucking awesome paragraph!" PDF p.6

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What this one read shows

The folklore that first readers break at episode 3 is contradicted by this one reader: he did not break at Proteus — he glided past it and hit his walls much later.

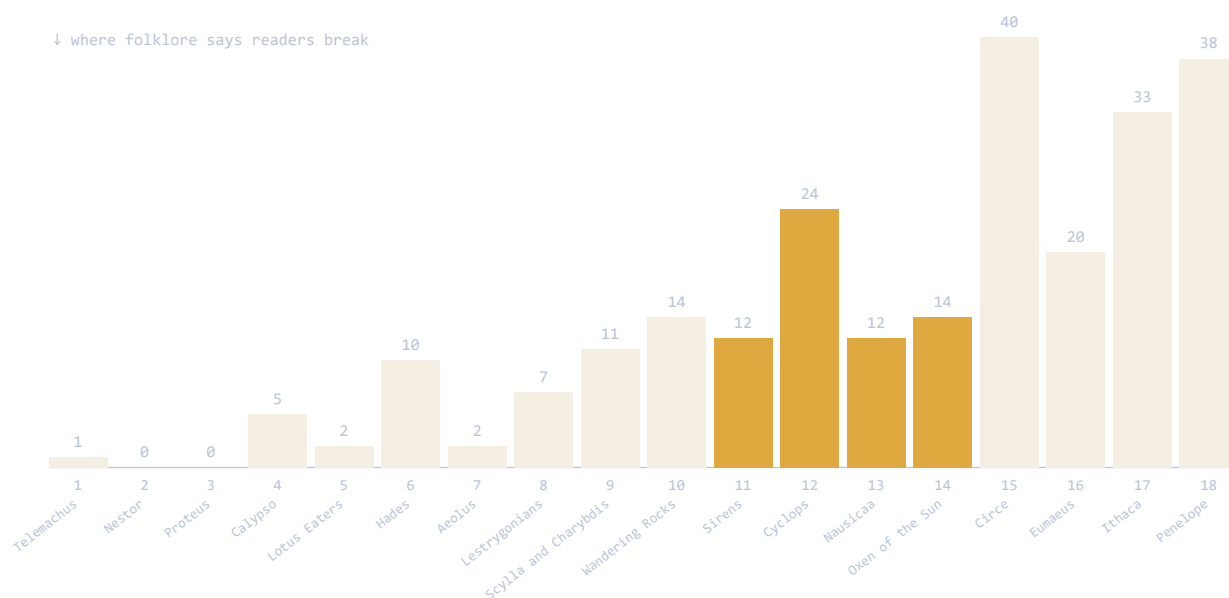
Episodes 2–3 drew zero placed questions; one retrospective request covered both ('Now that the first three parts are over, I would like to hear more about chapters 2 and 3 as well.' pdf 6). His stated stance at the start: 'I'm confused. I'm not despairing. I don't mind. I'm gonna read gently until bloom appears in chapter four.' (pdf 4), and the Proteus beach drew 'What a fucking awesome paragraph!' (pdf 6). That is all this proves: this one reader, forewarned by a 'great introduction' and reading gently, did not break there.

This reader's hardest sustained stretch was episodes 11–14, Sirens through Oxen of the Sun, where the style walls stack and the only survival language in the record appears.

'I am beyond understanding; I'm bewildered by the sound of it and the feeling of it.' (pdf 30); 'This is very confusing for me to understand.' (pdf 31); 'It's pretty impossible for me to read this book without your help, so I appreciate it.' (pdf 40); 'Understanding this chapter is very hard, and the language is not that friendly or charming, at least to me. But I am surviving. I have got a mission to finish this book before I get to Copenhagen.' (pdf 56).

Question count tracked engagement at least as much as difficulty: the three most-questioned episodes are the ones this reader loved loudest and read fastest.

Circe (40), Penelope (38), and Ithaca (33) top the table; the same stretch holds 'Interestingly, today has been a 200-page read for me—very intensive.' (pdf 69), the catechism greeted as 'you might laugh at me, but it's a breath of fresh air' (pdf 80), 12 curiosity/delight questions in Penelope alone, and the breakthrough 'I'm living inside this day.' (pdf 81).



GOLD BARS — EPISODES 11–14, THE STRETCH WITH THE RECORD'S ONLY SURVIVAL LANGUAGE. A QUESTION IS NOT A UNIT OF DIFFICULTY

PLACED QUESTIONS PER EPISODE, ONE FIRST READING. THE CURVE HAS VALLEYS THAT ARE NOT EASE AND PEAKS THAT ARE NOT PAIN.

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Episode by episode

The eighteen episodes, with the count of questions placed against each and the strains that dominated it. Episode titles are scaffolding — Joyce printed none (anchor A2).

Episode	Questions	Dominant strains	The shape in the data
1 · Telemachus	1	voice-referent	One question, asked mid-episode with the names still unfixed — and the reader's stance stated beside it: 'I'm confused. I'm not despairing. I don't mind.'
2 · Nestor	0	—	Zero questions placed here; Nestor was covered only inside the retrospective 'chapters 2 and 3' request at pdf page 6, which spans episodes and was left out of episode counts.
3 · Proteus	0	—	Zero questions placed to the famous breaker; the same retrospective request covered it, and the record around it holds delight — 'The beach scene is awesome.' (pdf 6).
4 · Calypso	5	plot-orientation, curiosity-delight	The first cluster: five questions, mostly household mechanics — which woman is wife, which daughter, which 'B' man is the lover — plus pure delight at the cat.
5 · Lotus Eaters	2	tone-stance, plot-orientation	Two questions, one locating the episode's own closing image in the wrong chapter — the episode boundaries themselves were still being learned.
6 · Hades	10	allusion-period, plot-orientation, voice-referent	First dense stretch: oblique backstory (the suicide note half-grasped as an accident), unrecognized songs, interior monologue misread as Cunningham speaking, and the dictation itself breaking ('hate speech' for Hades).
7 · Aeolus	2	style-form, allusion-period	Only two questions, and the read's first fatigue note — the headline chapter is the one the reader 'didn't find that fascinating to read.'
8 · Lestrygonians	7	allusion-period, style-form	Seven questions and the read's first named difficulty principle: the period specificity he had praised now works against him a century later.
9 · Scylla and Charybdis	11	allusion-period	Eleven questions, nearly all allusion-chasing through the Shakespeare debate, asked from awe more than distress — 'baffled by the beauty' is the episode's tone.
10 · Wandering Rocks	14	style-form, tone-stance, allusion-period	Fourteen questions; the section-break machinery had to be asked about twice in one exchange, and the episode ends in the first feel-without-logic confession.
11 · Sirens	12	style-form, plot-orientation	Twelve questions and the sharpest style wall so far: the fugue overture drew three struggle signals on a single pdf page (31) while the affair itself slid past offstage.
12 · Cyclops	24	allusion-period, style-form	The first half's maximum — Irish history, politics, and the parody catalogues arrived all at once; the exchange that closes it carries the read's one outright impossibility statement, and the what-is-a-nation passage was asked about twice across two days (pdf 40 and 47).
13 · Nausicaa	12	plot-orientation, style-form, voice-referent	The pastiche style was named with delight; the difficulty was the event itself — what actually happened on the beach had to be supplied whole, and the stopped watch was asked about twice.
14 · Oxen of the Sun	14	style-form, vocabulary-wordplay, allusion-period	The ordeal chapter, tracked stratum by stratum as 'the tone has changed once again' — the only episode the reader called both hard and unfriendly, survived on deadline discipline.

Episode	Questions	Dominant strains	The shape in the data
15 · Circe	40	allusion-period, plot-orientation, vocabulary- wordplay	The most-questioned episode of the whole read — but spread across a 200-page day and shot with delight and the first breakthrough declaration; engagement, not distress, drives this count.
16 · Eumaeus	20	plot-orientation, vocabulary- wordplay, allusion- period	Twenty questions, granular and confident — hypotheses offered for testing, the M'Intosh thread paid off, and one honest non-answer (tarbarrels) accepted without complaint.
17 · Ithaca	33	style-form, plot- orientation	Thirty-three questions inside a form the reader called 'a breath of fresh air'; the strain here is the catechism's abstract weighing and clinical register, not disorientation.
18 · Penelope	38	voice-referent, plot- orientation, curiosity-delight	Thirty-eight questions holding the read's densest referent confusion (Molly's slippery 'he' and 'her') and simultaneously its densest delight — 12 curiosity/delight questions — ending at the yes.

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The sixteen exchanges

The reading as it actually happened: sixteen dated sessions, the pages covered in each, and the questions each produced.

#	Exchange	Date	Questions	Record
1	Beginning: the tower, and who is who	8 July 2026	1	p.4
2	The edition, the eighteen episodes, and the numbering	9 July 2026	4	p.6
3	The Bloom household: Milly's letter, and Bannon straightened out	9 July 2026	9	p.10
4	Hades: the funeral carriage and the talk of the dead	9 July 2026	8	p.14
5	Aeolus and Lestrygonians: the newspaper office and the lunch	10 July 2026	8	p.17
6	Scylla and Charybdis, and into Wandering Rocks	11 July 2026	21	p.22
7	Wandering Rocks and Sirens: the hour Boylan goes to Eccles Street	11 July 2026	14	p.30
8	The end of Sirens, and Cyclops in Barney Kiernan's	12 July 2026	23	p.37
9	"Ireland. I was born here." — Cyclops, and into Nausicaa	13 July 2026	15	p.47
10	Nausicaa's close, and the ordeal of Oxen of the Sun	14 July 2026	17	p.54
11	Oxen of the Sun, and the descent into Circe	14 July 2026	18	p.61
12	Circe: the trial, the transformations, the homecoming of the dead	14 July 2026	16	p.69
13	Out of Nighttown: the end of Circe, Eumaeus, and Ithaca begun	15 July 2026	33	p.76
14	Ithaca: the catechism, and the arithmetic of a life	16 July 2026	17	p.91
15	The close of Ithaca, the black dot, and Molly's first pages	16 July 2026	19	p.99
16	Penelope, Howth Head, and the last yes	17 July 2026	29	p.108

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The hardest moments, in the reader's own words

Reproduced as spoken, dictation slips included (anchor A6). Cleaning them up would quietly falsify the record of learning a difficult book.

"It's pretty impossible for me to read this book without your help, so I appreciate it."

PDF p.40 · End of Exchange 8, closing the Cyclops day (episode 12)

— *The only outright impossibility statement in the whole record, made after a 90-page day through the end of Sirens and all of Cyclops; it names the condition of the entire read.*

"Understanding this chapter is very hard, and the language is not that friendly or charming, at least to me. But I am surviving. I have got a mission to finish this book before I get to Copenhagen."

PDF p.56 · Inside Oxen of the Sun (episode 14), Exchange 10

— *The one episode the reader called hard and unfriendly in the same breath — difficulty without compensating charm — crossed on deadline discipline alone.*

"This is very confusing for me to understand. I see the time reference, I see strange words, but what does that mean?"

PDF p.31 · The Sirens overture (episode 11), Exchange 7

— *The sharpest single style wall of the read: three struggle signals cluster on this one pdf page as the fugue prose detaches words from sense.*

"I am beyond understanding; I'm bewildered by the sound of it and the feeling of it."

PDF p.30 · Exchange 7, Wandering Rocks into Sirens

— *Bewilderment stated at its maximum — and fused, in the same breath as 'This is an amazing passage. Amazing.', to delight: the record's clearest proof that this reader's difficulty and pleasure ran on one wire.*

"What are we talking about? The times change, and everything moved from the scene by the sea into a room section. It is extremely much to ask."

PDF p.48 · Nausicaa's fireworks scene (episode 13), Exchange 9

— *Here the plot itself, not the prose, outran the reader: what actually happened on the beach had to be supplied whole, and the stopped watch had to be asked about twice before it landed.*

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Where this came from, in the record

Every claim in this document descends from the 117-page reading record. These four passages are the load-bearing ones; each link opens the record at that page.

- [PDF p.30 — "I am beyond understanding; I'm bewildered by the sound of it and the feeling of it." \(Wandering Rocks into Sirens\)](#)
- [PDF p.40 — "It's pretty impossible for me to read this book without your help, so I appreciate it." \(closing the Cyclops day\)](#)
- [PDF p.56 — "Understanding this chapter is very hard, and the language is not that friendly or charming, at least to me." \(inside Oxen of the Sun\)](#)
- [PDF p.6 — "The beach scene is awesome." \(Proteus, where the folklore expected a break\)](#)

The whole record, and the questions separated from their answers, are published under Reading:

- [The Reading Companion — the whole read, verbatim \(117 pages\)](#)
- [The Reading Questions — questions only \(17 pages\)](#)

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Caveats — every way this can mislead

SOURCE — the Reading Companion, the project's primary record: [the full 117-page PDF](#). The reader's questions are reproduced as spoken (anchor A6); sourced and inferred are separated (A5); contradictions are shown, not resolved (A4).

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THE ULYSSES PROJECT

A first reading, documented as it happened

A website built out of one first cover-to-cover reading of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: the reading record as the spine, analytic dimensions organised by type of operation rather than by subject, four output registers, and the project's own error log published beside its work.

hulkiokantabak.github.io/ulysses

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