



How to Read a Textbook:

A Guide for Making the Most of Your Academic Reading Time

Statistics indicate that we forget 40-50% of everything we read after about 15 minutes. For students with heavy reading loads and limited time, this presents a huge problem. However, there are methods that will help readers retain information and make the most out of their reading time.

First, students should determine how they learn best by looking at strategies and techniques that have worked well for them in the past. Study methods that worked well in high school or in previous college courses can often be adapted to help in other courses as well. Also, an analysis of the kinds of information to be learned, such as vocabulary, concepts, charts, etc., can give the reader clues as to which learning methods are most effective. Finally, making an analysis of reading styles coupled with learning goals can provide readers with helpful insights into the reading/learning process.

1. Survey reading material

When beginning a new textbook, look over the format of the entire book. Determine:

- Book layout
- Print size
- Readability (easy or difficult language)
- Presence of pictures and graphs
- Resources (glossary, chapter summaries, chapter questions, vocabulary lists)
- Supplemental materials (websites, CDs, etc.)

When beginning a new chapter in a familiar textbook, it is important to look over the entire chapter before reading to get an overview of the new information. This allows the reader to identify the difficulty of the material and decide how it fits into course goals. A preliminary chapter review helps determine how much time to set aside for reading and how to integrate the new information with what was learned previously.

If many of the words in the text seem unfamiliar, it is helpful to look up new vocabulary words before reading. Stopping to use the dictionary while reading can disrupt continuity and make it more difficult to see the big picture.

2. Make Predictions

Studies suggest that we learn by making connections between pieces of information and relating them to what we know. Readers can often predict the types of information that will be presented in a chapter. Making a conscious effort to do this will help readers focus on content.

Textbook study questions also provide an excellent snapshot of the most important information in the chapter. Reading these questions helps students focus on pertinent material as they read, making reading time more effective.

3. Ask/Create Questions

The act of reading can quickly become passive if the reader simply moves his/her eyes across the pages. To become more actively involved, turn each subject heading into a question. For example, the heading *Fundamentals of Nursing* can be turned into a question simply by using a question word such as who, what, where, or why. In this case, the question created could become *What are the fundamentals of nursing?*

Readers who use this method are less likely to have their minds wander. If you have ever read a page or two and realized you had no idea what those pages were about, this technique should help. This strategy also focuses concentration on the answers to the created questions. In other words, if your brain asks a question, it is more likely to retrieve the corresponding answer from the reading and to begin the process of putting that information into long-term memory.

4. Monitor Reading Comprehension

One way to make sure you are learning from reading is to stop at intervals to summarize what you have read. This method makes it easier to see how the new material is integrated into the course goals. Students who make notes while reading reinforce the new material and create a written record that can be used as a study aid. Students who recite new information orally reinforce auditory learning. In addition, putting new material into one's own words is proof of good comprehension. If there is something that needs clarification from the instructor, this method will point that out.

Margin notes, highlighting, and underlining are other techniques that help students monitor their reading comprehension. Such strategies also make it easier to predict possible test questions.

5. Test Your Comprehension

After reading, review material by identifying main ideas, supporting details, and appropriate examples. In addition, use critical thinking about how the new information can be applied or how it relates to the "big picture". Use notes and personal reflections to create a list of possible test questions.

References

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