

Reading a College Textbook

When you're reading textbooks for college classes, it's important to approach your reading differently than you would if you were reading a magazine, newspaper, or novel. It can be difficult to process and retain all the information presented in even a section of a chapter if you don't use strategies to help you. The information on this handout will guide your reading so that, when the time comes, you'll be able to recall important information for quizzes and tests, and you'll begin to process the content in a way that will help you with essay writing (seeing patterns and connections, for example). Everyone reads and studies differently, so it may take some trial and error to find out what method works best for you.

Previewing

Previewing is what you do before you actually read the textbook. It will help get you in a mindset for textbook reading; if you try to read your textbook right after another activity (doing homework for another subject, for example), your brain will still be transitioning as you read and you will have trouble processing information. Previewing will also make what you read easier to understand and remember.

- **Read the chapter title, chapter headings, and sub-headings:** These tell you what the chapter is about and give you the main ideas, which will be crucial for tests.
- **Think about these headings:** There likely will be terms or events that you are unfamiliar with, which is fine. Make a note of those that you've never heard of. Also consider the terms you have heard of. What do you already know about this subject, if anything? Are there any questions you already have? Write them down, either in your notes or on the first page of the chapter.
- **Skim the chapter:**
- **Go to the end of the chapter; are there any reviews or study guides?** If so, glance through them. These will indicate the most important information in the textbook, so you will know what to focus on while you read.
- **Finally, think about the content you're about to read.** Even if you think you know nothing about it, consider what you've already studied in class. How will this fit in? Does the content build from previous readings, or is it totally new?

Active Reading

You've probably highlighted or underlined while reading for a class before. This can be helpful, but it's important to annotate your textbook efficiently; too much marking can be distracting, and, in the end, might even be as unproductive as not marking at all. Quality, not quantity, is the key here.

- **Read everything twice:** The first time, make no marks. Read a section at a time, instead of something as large as the chapter or as small as a paragraph. The headings you've already skimmed through will help guide you.
- **Annotate during the second reading.** If you try to do this the first time you read something, you will most likely mark too much because all the information is new and therefore seems important. The second time, however, you'll be able to see the main points – the “big picture” – more clearly. (See below for more information on annotating.)

- **Pause to think:** After reading a section, consider what you've read. How does it fit together with previous information? What is your reaction? What do you expect might come up next? Doing this will help you retain information and ensure that you've understood what you've just read. If you realize you don't totally understand something, reread that section. If it still is confusing, or if you have a question, write it down and ask your professor in the next class.

Annotation

Annotation means taking notes, identifying the main ideas and key points, and organizing the material. Annotating, in contrast to merely underlining, takes thoughtful consideration. Develop your own method of annotating in order to become a better reader. Here are some tips:

- **Use underlining, circling, boxing, and different color pens** to organize your notes. Each can mean something else, like an important term or a main idea.
- **Write down main points, key ideas, definitions you've looked up, and questions you have.** It will also help you to write down any comparisons with material you've already read, or anything else that comes to mind – even if it seems irrelevant. Making connections is a great way to remember what you read. Also circle any words you don't know and look them up!
- **Use pictures and diagrams**, especially if you're a visual learner. These will show you the information in a different way, helping you to learn it.

Reviewing

A great way to keep up with all the information in a textbook is to review your notes weekly. It won't take a lot of time, but the benefits are huge.

- **Immediately after reading, look at the end and beginning of the chapter.** The study guide at the end obviously helps you with the main ideas of the chapter. Rereading the introduction of the chapter, though, will help you mentally summarize what you've just read, too.
- **Read your notes.** Whether you wrote in the textbook or took notes on a separate sheet, devote about 15 to 20 minutes weekly to reviewing. Don't do this right after you've read a new section, because you might get overwhelmed by so much information. Instead, designate a small portion of time every week to doing this. Reviewing when you aren't studying for a test takes some of the pressure off, and it will be easier for you to look at what you've learned so far and see how it all ties together. Additionally, you'll be able to see what you might need to go over once more (again, without the pressure of last-minute studying, it won't be a big deal to reread something).

As you can see, reading a textbook really requires more than just reading. It takes time, but putting the effort in now will benefit you long term. You will not only recall and connect information with less of a struggle, you will also save time studying for tests and avoid the panic of cramming.