

Read Your Textbooks Effectively & Efficiently

Get the most out of your textbooks! You spent a lot of money on them, your instructor seems to think they are important enough for you to read, and you keep finding questions on your quizzes and exams that weren't in the lecture or your notes. All of these and others are reasons to become more effective and efficient in reading your textbooks.

The following ten strategies will help you be more efficient and effective in using your textbooks and, as a result, learn more from them:

1 The Reading Environment!

There are places and times when you should read your textbooks and when you should not. There are lists of things which can interfere with effective reading. Some of these are just good sense and can be changed easily. Others are more subtle and will take more time and effort to overcome. The reading environment is one of the easier strategies to undertake but can have tremendous impact on your effective reading. So check and correct, if needed, these five environmental factors which can help you learn more from your reading:

LIGHTING. Often you do most of your reading in the same place. Is the lighting adequate? You should be able to see the page without strain. Does the light create a glare, or are you in the habit of reading in the direct sunlight? Either extreme – too much or too little light – can cause eyestrain, fatigue, or headaches, and, as a result, lower your reading efficiency.

VENTILATION. Warm, stuffy rooms can put you to sleep. You should have plenty of fresh air (not a draft) and the temperature should be comfortable cool. Being nice and “toasty” in a quiet room is a formula for failure when trying to read your textbooks.

READING POSITION. Your position when reading should not be either too comfortable or too uncomfortable. Do you sometimes “read yourself to sleep”? That is a great strategy for sleeping, a terrible strategy for reading and learning material from your textbook. The reverse, an uncomfortable position, can also inhibit your reading and learning by causing strain and fatigue. Find a position that falls in between these two extremes when you are seriously reading for learning.

FOCAL DISTANCE. Hold your book at an angle about 18 inches from your eyes. If you can't read at this distance without eyestrain, consider glasses. They will relieve the strain and resulting fatigue which inhibit your effective reading.

DISTRACTIONS. Concentrate on eliminating those distractions that you SEE and HEAR! No matter what you believe, research has shown repeatedly that you can only pay attention (full and focused attention) to one thing at a time. If you sit near a window, every movement will divert some of your attention away from your reading; your MP Player will cause you to wander from music to words; and, worst case scenario, the TV will divert your attention with both sight and sound.

So, when you really want to listen to music, watch TV, or simply enjoy some other activities, put your textbook down and enjoy those things. When you are ready to study by reading your textbook, be smart and create an environment that will increase your learning and reduce your fatigue and frustration.

② Identify Your PBID!

PURPOSE. Why are you reading this chapter? If you take a few minutes to understand the purpose of this reading, you will be better able to read with that purpose in mind. This will make you a much better reader and help you to learn the content more effectively and efficiently. Some examples of why you are reading this chapter include:

- My instructor expects me to understand this material so that I can better understand the class lecture.
- I am reading this background material to better understand today's lecture.
- I am reading this background material to add information and improve my class notes.
- My instructor expects me to memorize these details (i.e. the sequence of events and timing of those events which led to the American Revolution for American History, the musical genre of the Twentieth Century and primary composers of each for Music Literature).
- My instructor expects me to be able to write (i.e. discuss) the causes and effects of inflation on the economy of a nation for Economics.
- I need to understand the principles and processes involved in metabolism for Anatomy and Physiology.
- I need to write a "compare and contrast" paper on this principle.
- The essay portion of the mid-term will be on this topic.

BACKGROUND. Your ability to understand what you are reading is strongly affected by your background knowledge of that subject.

Before you start reading, skim the chapter headings, pictures, charts, graphs, diagrams, and the section summary.

Do you have a good understanding of this material?

If so, you may be able to reach your goal for reading this material more quickly than if the information were entirely new to you. You may only need to add a few points to your notes from class, or include specific ideas in your study plans.

Is this material new or relatively new to you?

If so, your plan for reading and studying this material will need to include a variety of techniques:

- You may need to re-read your material multiple times until you can organize and understand the information.
- You may need to take notes from your textbook and compare them with your classroom notes.
- If you have a study group, discuss this information with other students to enhance your understanding and help you think about the information in new and different ways.
- See a tutor for help with specific areas you don't understand.
- If Supplemental Instruction is available, go to the S. I. Session and ask questions, listen to other student's questions and learn from the leader's answers.

INTEREST. A lot of students say they don't like to read the textbook because it is boring. This may be true. However, in most classes, if you don't read and learn from the textbook you don't pass the class! If the textbook is boring to you, you need to create your own strategies for working around that obstacle. Think about these:

- Create interest by talking about the material with a study partner or study group. Divide the chapter into sections. Make each student responsible for reading and teaching the concepts of a section to the members of the group. Always remember that you will learn best what you have to teach. So, if a section is a real challenge, volunteer to teach it!
- Mark-up your textbook. Make notes, write lists, make charts, mind maps, or other learning tools to help you better understand and learn the material.
- Break your reading into small chunks. Read for twenty minutes. Take a break. Read for another twenty minutes.
- Talk with your instructor about the material.
- Create mock test questions before you read. Find, understand, and learn the answers.
- Reward yourself for reading and studying this boring material!

DIFFICULTY. The difficulty of the reading material can encourage or discourage a student from studying the material. Sometimes the format of the textbook is more difficult than the actual course material. And, while you have little control over the choice of the textbook, you do have options to help you if the reading is difficult:

- Read another textbook on the same subject and written is a similar level. You can check out textbooks from the Mullins Library on a variety of subjects.
- Go back and review your PB & I. Is one of these factors rather than the textbook making the reading difficult? If so, tackle that root cause and see if it makes a difference.
- See a tutor who can explain those sections you are having trouble understanding.

3 Get to Know your Textbook!

Your textbook is a tool for learning. And, just like any other tool, textbooks have unique features that need to be recognized and understood before you try and use them effectively. Use these seven ideas to see if there are clues that will guide you in using your textbook efficiently and effectively:



Examine the Title Page:

- Who are the authors?
- What is their standing in the field? (Perhaps you can ask your professor.)
- Do their training and background qualify them to write a book of this type?
- Who are the publishers?
- When was the textbook published? (What does this tell you about the book?)



Examine the Preface or Introduction:

- Why is a preface written?
- What does it tell you about the book?
- Do the author(s) introduce any unusual features of your book in the preface to prepare you to look for and use them?



Examine the Table of Contents:

- What does the table of contents tell you?
- How is the textbook organized? What are the main divisions in it?



Examine Index, Glossary and Other Material at the Back of the Textbook

- How does the index differ from the table of contents? How does it resemble the table of contents?
- What sort of topics should be looked up in the index instead of the table of contents?
- What are cross references?
- Is there a glossary in your textbook?
- Is there an appendix in your textbook? Why isn't this information included in the body of the book? How would its inclusion have affected the organization of the textbook?



Examine Study Questions, Guides, Tips, and Other Helps:

- Does the textbook provide study aids to help in understanding the material presented?
- Are the study aids in the form of questions, exercises, or activities?
- If questions are used, do they simply require finding the answers to must do some critical problem-solving to arrive at answers?
- Are there study aids both preceding and following a chapter? Which types of aids help you the most?

- Does the textbook provide suggestions for other readings or materials designed to help you understand the chapter?



Examine Chapter Headings, Sectional Headings, and Margin Guides:

- Look at the chapter heading and then section headings that follow. Write them down and see if this gives you an overview of the chapter.
- How do headings help you skim a chapter for specific information?
- Do you find different kinds of type or font in the chapter? Does this help you understand the organization of your textbook better?
- Does the textbook provide help in identifying material to be found within each paragraph? Is the topic sentence indicated?
- Does the textbook use summaries? How do these help? What is the difference between giving the “gist” of a chapter and summarizing its contents?



Examine Maps, Picture, Charts, Diagrams, and Tables:

- Which of these visual aids are used?
- Is the link between the visual aid and the text clear?

4 Skim for the Main Idea & Review!

Skimming is a very rapid reading technique which is designed to **identify main ideas** while reading very rapidly and **selectively skipping passages**. There are two appropriate times to skim a textbook chapter:



Skim the chapter before reading it carefully for content and comprehension. This will help you develop a general sense of the content and how it is presented before you begin to read and make notes for future study.



Skim the chapter when reviewing for a test. This is a quick, effective way to review material covered earlier in the term and to make sure that you have not forgotten facts you may need for this test.

To make your skimming most effective, use these simple steps:

- Check the length of the chapter. If it can't be read in a single setting, you may want to bookmark a stopping point.
- Read the title, opening paragraph and summary, if there is one.
- If there are questions at the end of the chapter, read them and scan for the answers.
- Find the major idea related to each heading or subheading of the chapter.