

The Key to Reading Textbooks Effectively



Purpose
Background
Interest
Difficulty

Purpose

Students often sit down to read with only the vaguest thought that they have to "study" this chapter and will hopefully retain "something." The truly successful student benefits by taking a minute to identify the purpose of the reading. Why are you reading that textbook? What do you hope to gain from this reading session?

Some common reasons that you need to read a text are:

1. Read the chapter for background information so that you will understand the next class lecture.
2. Read the chapter for information so that you will understand the lecture that you already heard and can add information to class notes.
3. Read the chapter and memorize details, such as definitions of types of rocks in geology or the time sequence of events that led up to the adoption of the post-apartheid constitution.
4. Read the chapter and be able to discuss causes and effects of different issues such as the cause of Soweto Student uprising of 1976 and its impact on the politics of South Africa.
5. Read a science text to understand scientific principles and processes such as Mendel's Law of Genetics or Newton's Three Laws of Motion.

Your purpose for reading often goes hand in hand with the type of testing in the class and the type of homework or papers that you have to complete.

Background

Your reading comprehension is strongly affected by your background knowledge. Remember, when you link new knowledge with existing knowledge, it improves the neuron link and helps you retain the new knowledge over a longer period of time.

So, what do you already know about the subject?

To determine this, do the following:

- ✓ Skim the chapter headings, pictures, charts, graphs, and diagrams.
- ✓ Read the summary.
- ✓ Think about what you know about this subject.

If you have a great deal of knowledge about the subject, then it may be easier for you to read the material. You will be able to meet your purpose quicker than if the information is totally new to you.

If you don't know a lot about the subject, then you will have to build your knowledge base. Sometimes an instructor will help by giving a lecture that is intended to build students' backgrounds before they attempt the textbook reading. However, you are often expected to do this on your own.

If this is the case, time management becomes a factor, since you may have to read the text three or four times to build enough knowledge about the subject in order to organize and comprehend the information. Discussing new information with other students in a study group will also enhance your knowledge base and help you think about the information in new ways.

Interest

Students often complain that they don't like to read the text because it is not interesting. In many cases this is a true statement. However, if you do not read the text, you are less likely to pass the class or get the grade you are striving for.

If you avoid the text because of lack of interest, you need to take some action to make the reading bearable. Some activities that might help include:

1. Create questions about the content before you read the textbook. You can use your Mirror Questions as a start. Pretend they are real test questions and you need to find and learn the answers to pass the class.
2. Share the reading with study partners. Divide the chapter into the number of partners you have. Each student is responsible for reading and teaching the concepts from their section to the other partners. One thing to remember, the part of the chapter that you learn the best will be the part that you teach to your other learning partners.

3. Do something with the information as you read the text. Write notes or lists in the margins. Create a picture in your mind of the information. Write an outline or try a visual approach such as a mind map.
4. Break the time you spend reading the textbook into small units. Concentrate on your reading for twenty minutes, then take a small break, then do another twenty minutes more of focused reading.
5. Reward yourself for reading and studying material that is not interesting to you.
6. Talk to the instructor and ask questions about the subject matter. Ask your instructor how he/she would advise you to read and comprehend the text. The instructor may say something to spark your interest.

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The difficulty of the reading material can encourage or discourage a student from studying the text. Sometimes the format of the text is more difficult than the actual course material. You have little control over the choice of the text, but you do have options if the reading is difficult. Try some of these strategies:

1. Read another text that is on the same subject, but is written on a similar level. You can check out other textbooks, articles, or books on the same topic at the Mullins Library.
2. Go back and think about your purpose, background and interest. One of these factors may be making the reading difficult.
3. Get a tutor for the class. The tutor can help explain the difficult parts of the textbook as well as the lecture in a way that will help you understand and remember the information you need to learn.
4. Use one or more of your key word diagrams (mind map, chain of events, cause and effect, pro/con) to help you better understand and learn the information you are reading. Remember, if you can diagram it you can understand it.