

Reading Strategies

Few students receive any formal reading instruction beyond junior high school. By that time, it is assumed you have mastered the basic reading skills you will need for higher education and that, with practice, your reading abilities will continue to improve. As a result, many students never learn efficient textbook reading approaches. You are forced to experiment on your own and, while the techniques you end up using sometimes work, usually they are not nearly as effective as they could be.

One problem with self-learned reading strategies is that they almost always are “passive” in nature. In order for you to get as much out of your study time as possible, your reading must be a conscious, organized, active undertaking. Some guidelines for active textbook reading are listed below. As you read through the list, think about whether adopting some of the tips would help make your study time more effective.

Active Reading

Think of an active reading session as being made up of four separate stages:

- (1) previewing,
- (2) reading to organize,
- (3) reading to find significant facts, and
- (4) summarizing.

(1) Preview the material

Previewing helps set up a framework in your long-term memory, allowing you to absorb topics, ideas and vocabulary within the text more readily. Previewing allows you to divide the chapter into subsections for further study, and can help eliminate the need for you to review the material later.

Previewing a textbook chapter usually takes about five or ten minutes. Here’s how to go about it:

- First, read the chapter title and introduction. As you do so, ask yourself: Why is this topic important? Does this topic relate to what I’ve already read? Does the introduction give any clues about what the important concepts of the chapter are? Does the introduction indicate what I should know when I’ve finished the chapter?
- Read the chapter learning objectives if they are listed. These indicate what the authors intend for you to know after you are finished with the chapter.
- Skim the chapter headings and subheadings. Note the way in which the chapter is organized and divided. Headings summarize primary topics within the chapter; subheadings expand upon those topics fully. Headings and subheadings can often be transformed into useful study questions.
- Note vocabulary and terminology. Important terms usually are denoted by bold print or italics.
- Read the chapter summary, if one is provided. The summary highlights the structure of the chapter and emphasizes important concepts.

(2) Read to understand the organization

Isolate one small section of the text at a time and read through it carefully. You are looking to uncover the relationship of parts to the whole and to synthesize individual facts into more global concepts. To help you in this task, most authors group and organize ideas in some meaningful way. It remains the reader's responsibility, however, to recognize the main ideas and integrate them with one another.

(3) Read to find significant facts

Any item of information that defines, proves or illustrates an important main idea is significant. As you read, take special note of this kind of information. You can locate it more easily if you pay attention to the language that is used. Illustrative facts are often introduced by the indicative phrase "for example"; definitions appear in clear, concise and authoritative statements; descriptions usually recount or relate information in narrative form; explanations either reconcile different opinions or describe conditions relevant to an idea.

- After reading a paragraph or two, stop and think about what you've just read. Try to explain the information to yourself in your own words. Don't move on to the next paragraph or section until you are completely sure you understand the last. If you don't understand basic concepts presented early in the chapter, you won't understand the more complex concepts that follow.
- Whenever you recognize a main idea, jot a note in the margin summarizing the point in the fewest possible words. This will help you clarify and remember important concepts. If you highlight the information instead of making notes, do so only after you have carefully explained the information to yourself.
- Pay particular attention to charts, graphs and illustrations. These help clarify important points in the text.
- Relating primary ideas to one another is the ultimate objective of reading for organization. To accomplish this, you might want to create an outline of major ideas, listing relevant details under each one, which shows how each relates with the other.

(4) Summarize

The last step in organizing the material is to generate a concise summary of what you have just read. A summary should preserve the author's organization, using language meaningful to you. Translating the author's words into your own succinct statements helps secure the material in your mind, enabling you to better remember what you have just read.

(adapted from the Academic Development, [Carnegie Mellon University website](#))