

Textbook Reading Strategies

When reading a textbook, there are certain strategies you can use that will help you understand what you are reading. There are strategies to use before you read, while you are reading, and after you read. Employing these strategies will help you to understand and retain what you are reading.

Before reading a book:

Preview: Before you read a book, preview the table of contents. This is an outline for what is encapsulated in the entire book. What is this book about? Preview the glossary, typically found in the back. Scan the words for words you already know, and briefly read through definitions for words that are new to you. What are the main terms and concepts? Check the front and the back of the book for other sections that might be helpful—are there timelines? Indices? Diagrams? Tables? How might these be useful?

Use prior knowledge: Chances are, you already know at least *something* about the topic. Are there chapters in the book about subjects you already know something about? What do you know about these subjects?

Check the chapter setup: Each chapter should be set up in a similar way. Knowing how the chapters are set up will help you tackle each chapter better. You will begin to know which sections are the most useful to you. Are there headings? Does each chapter begin with questions? Key words or concepts? What is at the beginning of each chapter? Do all chapters follow a similar “order?” What is at the end of the chapter? Questions? Review information? Definitions?

Predict: Based on what you see in the table of contents, the glossary, and other parts of the book, what type of information do you think will be in the book? What do you expect to learn?

Before reading a chapter:

Preview the headings or sections: Before reading a chapter, preview the chapter headings or sections. Use them to take notes or create an outline. As you read, fill in the information. What is this chapter about?

Preview the pictures: There will be pictures, graphics, tables, charts, graphs, diagrams, timelines, and/or other “visual aids” to assist you and exemplify what you are reading. Typically, each visual aid also has some material near it to accompany it. Look at these ahead of time to give you some background information on the content of the chapter. How do the pictures go with the content?

Preview the questions at the end of the chapter: If there are questions at the end of the chapter, read them! They will help give you a good idea of what you are supposed to learn as you are reading. As you are reading, you will purposefully or subconsciously look for the answers to these questions. You can even write them down and keep them beside you as a tool while you are reading. What are you expected to know or understand when you’re done reading?

Preview the review: If there is a chapter review, look it over. Again, it will help you know ahead of time what information you should remember when you are done reading. It's like an automatic study guide. What are the concepts you should understand when you're done reading?

Preview the vocabulary words: Look for words in bold and read through them, maybe even read through the sentence or a couple of sentences around them. How do you find the definitions? Are they given to you right in the chapter? Do you need to use the glossary? Are there words you already know? Are there new words? How many are there? Are they tough or easy?

Use prior knowledge: Now that you've previewed the chapter, think about what you already know about the topics in the chapter. Conjuring up background information or prior knowledge will prepare you for new information. What do you already know about the subject?

Predict: Having thoroughly scanned the chapter, make predictions for what you think it will be about. What information is likely to be in the chapter? Are there parts that you already know? Which parts might be confusing to you?

While you are reading a chapter:

Set the mood: Create a reading environment that works for you. Sometimes turning music or the tv off (or on) will help you to gain focus. For some, minimizing distractions is necessary. You may need to take a quick break to relax, get other things off your mind. Some of you are more active learners, and it might actually help you to tap your foot while reading, read while standing, or even read while pacing around. Some read better in a "quiet" light, while others need the light to be bright. Some read better sitting up, while others concentrate better lying down, or, as mentioned above, even standing up! Figure out what your ideal reading environment is.

Highlight: Highlight information that is useful, such as definitions, key ideas, answers to the questions from the end of the chapter, names, dates, numbers, etc. Useful information is sometimes in bold, sometimes listed, sometimes numbered, and sometimes given in headings. If you think the information might be important on a test, highlight it. Do not highlight things you already know. Do not highlight everything. Highlight sparingly, so the highlighted information stands out and can be of use to you.

Read carefully, but at a good pace: If you are reading too slowly, you may lose what you are reading. Work through it as quickly as you can while still understanding. Too quick is obviously no good, but sometimes too slow will not work either.

Look for answers to the questions: If you find answers to the questions from the end of the chapter, chances are the information is important.

Keep track of your own questions: As you are reading, keep track of questions you might have. If you read something confusing, make a note of it. An easy way to do this is to put a question mark next to the section in question. This will give you easy reference to ask a question of the instructor or a classmate. Maybe as you read further, the answer will become clear to you.

Look for vocabulary words: Usually the definition is given within the sentence or in the next one. Read carefully to make sure that you understand the words in bold.

Develop "fix-up" strategies: When you get lost or confused, you should have a plan for what to do to help yourself move through the reading. In class, it might help to ask for help, either from a

classmate or the instructor. At home, you may need to refocus. You may need to slow down, or speed up. You may need to reread. It is important that you realize when you are getting lost. As obvious as this sounds, sometimes readers who struggle just keep reading, thinking that as long as they read the words, they are reading the chapter. Without understanding, there is no point in reading. After you start to be aware of when you are struggling, you will figure out strategies for how to help yourself back into understanding.

Develop reading strategies that work for you: At first, you might want to employ all strategies until you figure out which ones help you. Is it easier for you to read the chapter, then go back and look for key information? Does it help you to take notes while reading? Does it help you to go back and take notes after you read? Does highlighting help? Eventually, it will save time to just do the steps that are necessary for you.

For some, taking notes during reading helps: We will not practice this in class, but some learners learn by taking notes AS they read. It keeps them involved in what they are reading. For many readers, it is distracting to take notes as they read, as it chops up the reading. Starting and stopping and starting again might work for some. If you think it will work for you, try it!

After you finish reading:

Take notes: Go back through the chapter and take notes of what you've highlighted. Sometimes writing something down gives you the extra think time to help you remember it. For the same reasons you might jot down a couple of items you need at the grocery store, writing important things from your chapter might be just the extra trigger you need to retain the information. Plus, your notes will offer you a much more condensed version of the chapter. Since your notes will be shorter than the chapter, they will be easier to study. Remember, when you take notes, it is not important to write complete sentences or thoughts. You can abbreviate, skip words, use shorthand, whatever you need to do to make the notetaking quick, but effective.

Quiz yourself: If there are questions at the end of the chapter, answer them. Even if you have to look back through the chapter to come up with the answers, the process of doing so will help you to remember. If there are not questions at the end of the chapter, come up with some questions using headings, vocabulary words, and key concepts. Answer your own questions.

Study vocabulary words: Using the context, word pictures, memory tricks, definitions, or plain memorization, study and learn your vocabulary words.

Retell yourself the chapter: Go back through the chapter and use the headings to retell yourself the information from the chapter. If you can do this quite easily and with little "help" from rereading, chances are you got the gist of the chapter.