

Learning From Texts

Introduction

Reading and remembering information from textbooks can be one of the most challenging aspects of learning at university. Since there can be a lot of variation in how texts are used from one course to another, the strategies that will be effective for reading and studying texts will vary from course to course as well.

This handout will discuss strategies that can be effective for learning from textbooks in courses where the text provides much of the material on which tests and exams will be based. These strategies will not work effectively for all texts in all courses. For each of your courses, it's important to analyze what role the textbook or readings play and how readings are related to the course objectives, lectures, labs, seminars, and assignments. Once you've figured out how the pieces of a course fit together, you can choose the study strategies that will be the most effective for dealing with each component.

Active Reading

Some experts claim that watching TV has turned us into passive receivers of information. Students who have trouble concentrating and remembering what they read may have a passive reading style — they slide their eyes over the words and assume that somehow something will sink in. "Active" reading requires interacting with the information, or creating an "internal dialogue" with the text. To read actively, comment on or ask yourself questions about points in the text. Look for major points and supporting evidence or examples as you're reading. Students who read actively remember the material better, and therefore are using their time more effectively. Using a reading technique like SQ4R, discussed in detail in the [SQ4R: A Classic Method for Studying Texts](#) handout can also help to make your reading style more active.

Speed & Comprehension

Many students are concerned about their reading speed. However, the speed with which you can whip through a reading is not nearly as important as whether the reading technique that you're using is "appropriate for the task." The way you read a novel or newspaper should be different from the way you read a textbook. With a text that you're required to know thoroughly, a slow, careful pace is time-consuming but necessary for comprehension and retention. It's usually smarter to spend an hour on five pages and know the material well than to spend an hour on fifty pages and remember nothing. However, it's just as inappropriate to spend hours memorizing every detail of a chapter when all that's required is a general understanding of the main ideas.

A note about speed reading — Woody Allen once took such a course and then read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. He said, "It involves Russia." Research has shown that most speed reading courses teach a method similar to skimming, rather than one appropriate for the task of understanding and retaining the complex, challenging, academic material usually found in textbooks.

Reading & Concentration

One way to improve concentration while reading is to analyze the distractions that are interfering with it. For example, consider when and where you're reading. It's not surprising that students get sleepy while reading if the bulk of it is done early in the morning, late in the evening, or at any time of day sitting on a bed. Planning reading sessions for times when your energy and concentration are high can make a big difference in how efficiently you read and how much you remember. The distraction of noise or roommates can usually be eliminated by changing where you read.

Good concentration is often closely related to time management. Because you are attempting to remember most of what you read, it's a good strategy to read in short stretches, spread out over a period of time. If you read for two or three hours at a time, it is unlikely that you'll remember the material in any detail. Students often set a time or page limit on their reading, then waste time and inhibit concentration by frequently checking the clock or the number of pages left in the chapter. Don't impair your effectiveness with one of these artificial limits — instead, monitor your "learning." If you read the same page several times and still don't know what's there, it's time to take a break and/or switch tasks. It doesn't matter if you've read three pages or thirty — the point is not to sit wasting time once you've realized that you're no longer learning. Be sure to plan reading sessions carefully (a number of short sessions distributed over time can be difficult to fit in) so that the task gets done when required. For

more information on the connection between concentration and time management, check out [A Guide for Time Management](#), our award-winning, Web-based workshop on time management.

Even when you're reading in short stretches, you may find that your mind sometimes seems to wander back to a personal situation or problem. In these situations, a focusing strategy might help. For example, reserve a specific time when you'll think about the problem. Then when you notice that your mind has wandered back to the problem again, say to yourself, "Back to work now... I will think about that at 4 o'clock." Then, at 4 o'clock or whatever time you've designated, sit down and think through the problem, without worrying about the work you could be doing. Some students like the "checkmark" technique. Keep a blank sheet of paper beside you when reading, and each time your mind wanders put a checkmark on the sheet and go back to work. This helps to get you re-focused quickly and keeps track of your level of concentration during a particular study period. See our handout on [Memory & Concentration](#) for more information.

Dealing with Difficult Texts

At some point in your university career, you may encounter a textbook which you find difficult to understand or follow. There are several strategies you can try to improve your comprehension of difficult texts.

Improve Your Knowledge of the Subject's Terminology

Any text will seem difficult to understand if you don't know the definitions of the special terms which are the building blocks of communication in the discipline. For example, it would be difficult to read an introductory Political Science text if you're unsure of the significance of terms like "democracy," "society," or "politics." A regular dictionary often won't provide more than a basic definition, so you need to look for a specialized dictionary in the reference section of the Library. It's probably worth your money to invest in a special dictionary or reference book for the subject which is your major.

Assess Your Knowledge of the Basics

It's possible that your text and even the course itself could be "above your head" if you lack an understanding of some basic concepts in the discipline. If you're struggling with an introductory course, talk to your instructor to make sure that you have the necessary prerequisites and prior knowledge expected for the course. Meanwhile, check the Library for an introductory book on the subject. Even reading an overview in an encyclopaedia may help fill in some gaps.

Read Out Loud

Reading out loud can help to increase your comprehension of difficult material. If you read aloud with a classmate and take turns analyzing, explaining, and summarizing the text, you may also find that another person's perspective helps to clarify meaning.

Try Another Text

The problem may simply be that the text is poorly written, or for some reason the author's style is difficult for you. Although you can't abandon your required text, it may be helpful to find another book on the same topic in the Library. Sometimes a different explanation of the same topic is all it takes to make an incomprehensible subject more accessible.

Integrate Notes

In some courses it's important that the material from the texts and lectures be learned together, so integrating your notes can be an important study strategy. You may want to try mapping or diagramming as a way of putting text and lecture material together. At the end of a topic or a chapter, you draw a diagram or picture which summarizes how the lecture and text material fit together. Diagramming can improve retention of material because it enables you to re-organize and integrate information from both the lectures and the textbook, and see it in a different format.

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http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/assistance/learning_services/handouts/learning_from_texts.cfm