



CHAPTER 8

Reading Texts

Reading texts can be an active or passive experience, similar to determining your behavior inside class as an active or passive listener. Furthermore, taking notes when you read from a text is different than classroom note-taking. Reading texts requires a more concentrated focus since the words themselves are teaching you, rather than a live person at the front of a classroom. Reading textbooks and other required sources is a major part of the educational process. Yet many students go about their reading in completely the wrong way. Here's how to do it the right way!

Types of Poor Readers

Students who do not read their text effectively come up with many ways to do it incorrectly. Here are some profiles of types of readers you may find familiar.

“Highlighter Happy” Students

Some students are “highlighter happy,” tackling a required reading assignment by using a bright yellow highlighter as a machete. As they read, they highlight anything that looks remotely important, could be worth remembering, might be on a test, or is confusing. When a highlighter-happy student's mind starts to wander, she doesn't really worry; as long as something is highlighted, she believes she has “covered” it. When highlighter-happy people are done



reading, more of the page is bright yellow rather than white. They are satisfied with their work, certain that they have read the chapter thoroughly.

Unfortunately, these students are often surprised when they do poorly on the final exam. And that's not the worst of it. When they try to sell back their fifty-dollar textbook at the end of the semester, the bookstore won't take it. All that the clerk asks is, "Who wants to buy a neon yellow textbook?"

Bored Readers

Some students find reading boring. The title of a book alone can put them to sleep or in a foul mood. A bored reader scans the first few sentences, comes across terms he's never seen before, like "signifier" and "syntax," and begins to roll his eyes. "This is soooo boring," he thinks to himself. He reads another line, and then glances out the window, staring at the sky, trees, and a dog catching a Frisbee on the grass, then he returns to read the assignment. He has forgotten now what he just read since his mind was

wandering moments before, so he starts reading from the beginning. Rubbing his aching head, he reads the first two paragraphs, and soon begins to think about his weekend plans. What will he do Saturday night? He then goes back to the reading, but once again has lost his place. He starts the first sentence again, then decides the reading is just too boring and probably won't be on the test anyway. Unfortunately, he is wrong.

Speed Readers

Finally, there are the speed readers, who look over the syllabi for their fall courses, realize that to do all the required reading for their five courses will take about forty hours a week. Then they realize that to do all that reading is practically impossible if they are also going to attend classes, eat, and sleep.





Be wary of thinking you have mastered speed-reading. By definition, skipping over words means you are overlooking content, sometimes crucial content. If you speed-read and still have success mastering concepts and earning good grades, then continue. Otherwise, good old-fashioned focused reading will do the trick.

On the side of a bus, a student might see what she thinks is her salvation, an advertisement for a course in Super Speed-Reading. She pays \$500 for a three-hour seminar on super speed-reading, given at a local motel. In the course, she learns to run her fingers down the page as fast as she can, reading just the middle section of each line. The instructor assures the class that although they may feel they are missing a great deal, the brain still manages to process everything it sees, even at this speed. A proud graduate of the course, the speed reader can now read the “Semiology” article at a super-speed, finishing it in four and a half minutes—without understanding a word of it!

Getting Started

We all think we can read fairly well; after all, most of us have been doing it since elementary school. But reading serious academic texts is much more difficult than the other kinds of reading we are accustomed to. It requires a whole new set of skills and techniques.

The reading strategy outlined in this chapter involves taking notes while you read. You might, therefore, want to read at a desk or table as opposed to lying down on a bed or couch; if not, bring some kind of flat surface (a large hardcover book, clipboard, or lap desk) on which to write. You’ll also need the same loose-leaf paper you use for taking notes in class. Make certain to write the date and author or title of the material you are reading at the top of each page. That way, if the sheets get out of order, you can easily put them back. After each reading assignment, when you’re done taking notes, put them in the same notebook binder where you keep your classroom notes.



If your professor has assigned a reading for a particular day, bring your notes from your reading with you to the lecture; this will enable you to refer to them and fill in any gaps on the fly you may encounter.

If your reading assignments don't coordinate with the lectures, keep reading notes in a separate section of your binder. Usually, however, your professor coordinates reading assignments with lectures. If this is the case, keep the reading notes alongside the lecture notes. By keeping lecture and reading notes side by side, you'll be able to observe the ways in which the reading assignments and lectures fit together and relate to one another. For example, you'll see if certain points are covered repeatedly—an indication they are especially important and likely to show up on an exam.

Effective Reading: A Step-by-Step Strategy

In order to become an *effective* reader, you have to be an *active* reader. That means doing more than just looking at the words on the page; it means becoming involved with the material and *thinking* while you read. Here are some strategies for effective reading of academic materials. The goal for note-taking while reading a text is the same as the goal for note-taking in the classroom: to become a more active learner who absorbs and understands the information being conveyed.

These are the basic steps of the strategy:

1. Know where you're headed—and why
2. Make a rough outline
3. Watch for key terms and take notes with brief definitions
4. Note general themes
5. Write a response



In the detailed description of the steps that follow, you will learn more effective ways to read a textbook. Most courses you take require you to use a textbook that has been written for that subject, especially in the survey and introductory courses you take in high school or as a college underclassman.

Step #1: Know Where You're Headed—and Why

When you go on a trip, you usually have an itinerary that maps out your destination and the route you will take to get to it. You know exactly where you are going and why—and that's what keeps you from getting lost. The same holds true for reading assignments. If you don't want your mind to wander, make certain you know right from the beginning where you're headed and the route you are taking. Before you begin reading, think a bit about *what* you

are reading. What is the title of the chapter, article, or text? Does it give you any hint as to what you can expect? As with classroom lectures, each chapter or article you read will have a main topic. Make certain you know the topic before you start to read.

Try to keep in mind not only *what* you are reading, but *why*. Of course, one reason is because the material is required reading. But if that is the only reason, you are going to get bored pretty quickly and resentful of your homework assignment and that can lead to you “tuning out.” Each chapter assigned somehow contributes to your understanding of the course material, as well as to your general knowledge. If you can designate a purpose for each thing you read, you'll feel better about doing the work and achieving a deeper understanding of it. You won't be reading just to please the professor, but because you see some value in fulfilling the assignment.

Keep these questions in mind when you are reading:

- What do you think your professor is hoping you will gain by reading this?



- What might you personally gain from this reading assignment?
- How does the chapter or text fit in with the overall subject matter of the course?
- How does the text fit in with the current course topics (i.e., the lectures for that week)?
- Does the chapter build on previous material? How?
- Does the chapter prepare you for upcoming topics? How?
- Is anything in the chapter familiar to you? What? Where and when did you first learn it? What did you already learn? What in the chapter is new to you?

Thinking about these questions helps you become actively involved in the reading assignment right from the start. These questions also help you gain a more personal interest in the reading by connecting it with your overall knowledge. That way, you won't feel you are reading just because it's required, but because it can somehow enhance your understanding of the subject matter.

Step #2: Make a Rough Outline

Just as you do when taking notes during a lecture, make a rough outline of most reading assignments. If an assignment is creative—e.g., an art project—or simply an analysis of a text, for example, don't feel that you have to take notes on that assignment, too. Use your judgment on what seems a worthwhile way to spend your time. Not all students need to take notes on everything. If you choose to take notes on your reading, this will fulfill two important purposes:

1. Taking notes gives you something to *do* while you read, making you more of an *active* reader with a purpose. This, in turn, keeps you focused on the assignment and minimizes the tendency to let your mind wander.
2. These outlines help you remember the material.

When it comes time to study for an exam, you can



read over these notes rather than having to go over large, highlighted chunks of text in a book.



A rough outline can be a useful tool to serve as a sort of “SparkNotes” for your reading assignment. With multiple assignments and subjects to juggle, referring to a rough outline can be enough to jog your memory about the content of an assignment when they risk merging together and being forgotten.

To make the rough outline, just note various topics and subtopics as you did with lecture notes. Making a reading outline will be easier than taking notes during a lecture since most textbooks (unlike some professors) make it very clear how they are organized. Many books list, either in the table of contents or at the start of the chapter beneath the title, the topics covered in a particular chapter. Within a chapter, the topics, subtopics, and sub-subtopics usually have

clearly labeled headings and subheadings. Most books differentiate between the more important topics and lesser ones by changing the typeface style of the headings. For example, the more important headings will be larger and/or in boldface, while less important ones will be smaller and in lighter or italic type. As you read, watch for headings and subheadings and, as they come up, write them down. As with any outline, the less important a topic is, the more you indent its location on your paper.

Step #3: Watch for Key Terms

Most textbook chapters also center on key terms—names, dates, facts, theories, and concepts—that are new to you. And just as you take notes in lectures, look for key terms and include them in your reading notes. It will probably be easier to



identify these terms in textbooks than during lectures because in most textbooks they are in boldface or italics. Try to fit them into your rough outline by placing them beneath the same heading or subheading in your notes as they appear in the chapter.

Include brief definitions of these key terms. You don't need to write these definitions in complete sentences. Use abbreviations and symbols. Just remember, though, that your notes should still be easy for you to read. Don't copy down the exact, word-for-word explanation of the term as you find it in the text. Instead, use your own words and paraphrase to define the term as briefly as possible.

Step #4: Note General Themes

When you are finished with a chapter, take a few

minutes to jot down its general themes. To help you identify these, consider the following questions:

- What seemed to be the author's main concerns in this chapter?
- What ideas, topics, or points were mentioned more than once?
- Was there any kind of introduction or conclusion? If so, what points did the author make here?
- Did you get a sense of the author's opinion or stance on the material he or she was addressing? What was it?

These notes will be instrumental in helping you prepare for exams. In addition to helping you recall the overall content of a reading assignment, your notes will enable you to compare the key themes of all reading assignments and classroom lectures. This process will help you gain a sense of how various parts of the course fit together. And it's a safe bet that when themes show up throughout the semester, they're likely to appear on an exam.



Step #5: Write a Response

The reading process doesn't end when you get to the last word of the chapter. When students complete the last sentence of a reading assignment, many think, "Whew! That's finished. What a relief!" and close the book without giving it another thought. They don't realize that a great deal of the work they've just done will have been a waste of time. While they have read the assignment, they have not really *thought* about it.

They have looked at the words on the page, but they haven't thought about what they mean. They don't know if they even understood what they have just read. In short, they haven't really learned anything based on what they've read. If you want to learn something from what you read, it is crucial that you *think* about it after you've finished reading. An excellent way to keep you thinking is to write a reading response.

To write a reading response, simply write whatever you want about what you've read. A reading response is *not* a summary of the chapter. Instead, it's your opportunity to engage with the material you've just read. Think of yourself as having a conversation with the author of the text. This is your chance to share whatever is on your mind.

Here are some questions you might address in your response:

- What is your emotional reaction to what you've read? Do you like what you read? Why or why not? How did reading the text make you feel? How do you think the writer wants you to feel?
- What points do you think are most important to the writer? Did the writer successfully convey these to you?
- What parts, if any, did you have trouble understanding? Why? What made it confusing?
- What questions about the text do you still have? Make certain you list questions about any terms, topics, or points you didn't understand. You can also list questions you have that arise from the



reading. Are there any additional questions about the subject matter that were not addressed in the text? (By the way, these questions don't necessarily have to be answered right away. They may be answered as you read more throughout the semester; or, they may never be answered.)

- How does this text connect with other concepts you've learned? Does it tie into ideas you've studied in other courses? Does the reading remind you of anything else?

Even though you write the responses *after* you finish reading, writing them is going to help you become a more effective reader and active participant in the reading process. Many students approach required readings like mindless robots; they focus on the words on the page and try to suppress any of their own thoughts or feelings. But the mind wants to be more involved than that. And if it's not involved, it is going to wander. You are not a robot. You are a real person who has thoughts, feelings, and opinions about what you read. You are allowed to like something you read, or to dislike it. Your reading

might either confuse or excite you. Your response gives you the opportunity to express what you are thinking and feeling. As you become more used to this process, you'll find yourself considering your thoughts about a reading assignment as you read it.

Follow Up

Once a week, set aside time to read over your responses to the reading assignments for the previous week. Pay special attention to any questions you had about things you did not understand, and make note of them in the margins. You can then go to other sources for more detailed explanations of these tricky concepts, just as you did for your lecture notes. You can look up the subject online. You can also ask friends in the class or the professor about difficult points you don't understand.



ALERT

Review. Review. Review. Go back and review old notes from time to time as well as your reading responses to gain a better understanding of how your course has progressed. Sometimes you will have an “a-ha moment” when the ideas start to come together and make more sense to you.

You may want to read your written responses throughout the semester, especially as you get closer to an exam. You’ll find that as a course progresses and you get deeper into the subject matter, you’ll gain a better understanding of key concepts and some of your responses will start to either make sense or not pertain to the overall class concept at all. You’ll also start to see how different concepts are related to one another, and how they fit into the “big picture” of the course. A reading assignment that initially confused you may make sense later in the semester. Long after

you’ve completed a reading, you might begin to see how the material relates to another reading or topic covered in class. You can then go back over your initial response and make additional notes that indicate what you now understand.

Be a Selective Reader, Not a Speed-Reader

You are probably going to have many more reading assignments than you can possibly read. For many students, the solution is to take a course, or buy a book, on speed-reading. Speed-reading, though, is perhaps the most passive form of reading there is. Most speed-reading methods encourage you to flip pages as fast as possible by reading only small sections of the text, such as the middle column on the page. The advocates of these methods claim that you do, in fact, comprehend everything you read this way,



and that as long as your eye sees words on the page, you can “read” them.

The problem with this method is that you don’t have the opportunity to think about what your eye sees. And if you don’t think about the material, you are not going to absorb it. That means it can be all too easily forgotten. You probably won’t be able to use the assigned reading material to answer questions on an exam.

How to Skim a Text

Rather than not read a text at all, you may decide to skim it. Skimming a text doesn’t mean you just read it at a slightly faster pace than usual. It is really a form of selective reading.

The best way to skim a text is to do the following:

1. **Read introductions, conclusions, and summary paragraphs.** You should read the introduction and conclusion of each text in their entirety, as these paragraphs usually outline the

most important points covered in the text. You might also look for “summary paragraphs.” These are paragraphs within the text that summarize smaller sections of the text rather than the whole thing. If a text is divided into topics and subtopics, each with its own heading, these sections might have their own introductions and conclusions. As you skim, be on the lookout for terms such as, “in conclusion,” “to sum up,” and “therefore,” that indicate the author is summarizing various points.

2. **Read first and last lines of paragraphs.** If you go through a text and read just the first and last line of each paragraph, you will actually get an adequate concept of what the text covers. The first line of many paragraphs will introduce the topic covered, while the last line will often summarize the contents of the paragraph or serve as a transition to the next paragraph. As you read first and last sentences, you might come across a line that indicates a paragraph is particularly important or intriguing. If that



happens, go ahead and read the entire paragraph.

3. **Look at illustrations.** Just as first and last sentences of paragraphs often sum up key points, pictures, charts, and diagrams usually correspond to key information conveyed in the text. Look over all of these and read the captions that explain them.
4. **Read all words and phrases that are set in boldface or italics.** If the term is unfamiliar to you and seems significant, read the entire sentence as well.

However, don't fool yourself into thinking skimming is a thorough reading. Skimming is just that: lightly going over an assignment and gaining a general overview. It's what to do if you're in a pinch and should not be your overall strategy.

Challenges with Texts

If you are having tremendous difficulty with a particular text, there's no reason why you can't seek help. Here are some places to go.

Other Written Materials

Just as you do for your lecture notes, you can try to find other textbooks and source materials that cover similar topics. Go look at other textbooks, academic encyclopedias, study guides such as Schramm's Outlines or Barron's Guides, and other books on the same general subject. Check the back of the assigned text to see if there is a bibliography, works cited, or list of suggested reading. CliffsNotes or SparkNotes, if used properly as reading supplements, can be effective learning tools to reinforce terms or fill in any gaps or ideas you may have missed or misunderstood along the way.

You might get lucky and find a book or article that covers the exact same material but is written in much



simpler language that makes it easier to understand. Even if you find sources that are equally complex, it will probably help to read them. Other sources might describe the same material in a different way. For example, they might use different illustrations and examples to describe the same overall principles. By reading more than one source on the same topic, you could gain a fuller explanation and a more complete understanding of it.

Work Together with Classmates

You can also discuss the reading assignment with fellow students. Since these assignments are not graded, there's no reason why you can't work with friends. Perhaps a fellow student just happens to have a better understanding of this particular subject than you do, and you can ask her questions. It's important, though, that you have a *discussion* with the student about the text rather than just get answers. Express

your own opinions and thoughts. Having a conversation ensures that you listen carefully to the other student and also that you think more about the text.

Even if other students don't have a firm grasp on the material, a discussion may help you come to a better understanding of it. Try taking turns attempting to "teach" sections of the text to one another; very often, in the process of trying to explain something to another person, you also manage to explain it better to yourself.

Ask Your Instructor

Finally, you can always ask your instructor for extra help. Only do this if you really need the help and have tried to sort out the problem on your own first. Don't ask for it on every assignment. You don't want to give the impression that you are too lazy to do the work and can't think for yourself. If you do decide to ask for help, see your professor during office hours or after class and say, "I'm having trouble understanding



‘Source X.’ I wonder if you can recommend some other sources to read that could provide me with more information.” By asking for more sources rather than an explanation of the material, you are indicating that you are willing to work on your own. The professor then may, in addition to recommending sources, ask you where you are having trouble and offer further explanations. Whatever you do, do not complain about how hard or boring a reading assignment is—nothing makes a worse impression!

Using Other Sources

So far we’ve primarily been discussing how to read textbooks. While many college and high school classes rely on textbooks, especially for introductory and survey courses, you will probably be assigned readings from a variety of sources. You can generally follow the reading strategy outlined above, although you may emphasize certain steps more than others,

depending on the type of source you read. Here are some typical types of materials you may encounter in high school and college.

Scholarly Articles

These are articles written by professors and academics that appear in professional journals. They are often only a few pages (between five and ten). But don’t be fooled by their length; they will often require much more time and effort to read. These are the sources most likely to be written in academic style, using sophisticated vocabulary and addressing complex ideas. The authors of these articles often assume their readers have the same level of education and background as they do. That means they will be less likely to define key terms and concepts for you than a textbook does. You therefore might have to spend more time in the library using other sources to understand the information conveyed.



If you find yourself reading the same sentence over and over again, not comprehending it, it's a sure-fire sign you are not focusing. Take a break, get some fresh air, have a snack, stretch. Do whatever you need to do to refresh so you can get back on track and refocus.

Primary Sources

Many courses include primary sources, such as historical documents, novels, plays, etc. It is vital that you read these sources before class so that you can follow the lecture. Primary sources, particularly works of literature, often won't involve key terms and won't necessarily include clearly identifiable introductions and conclusions. Rather than making outlines that include key terms, you need only to note the general themes or characters. You should still write a reading

response if you can, as this will help you recall the source in more detail when you study for an exam.

Lab Reports

For science classes, you may be required to read laboratory reports, accounts of experiments, and scientific studies. The most important element to read and make a note of is the outcome of the experiment. But don't be fooled into thinking you only need to read the conclusion. Make certain you have a sense of the general parameters of the experiment, such as the setup of the study and who participated in it.

Also, try to evaluate the study: Are there any flaws in the setup or in the scientists' reasoning? Are there any factors that could have influenced the findings other than the ones the scientists discussed? What are the assumptions that were made in the study? Were the scientists aware of these assumptions? These issues often form the basis for examination questions.



Course Packets

Sometimes the professor puts together a special packet for the course that includes a variety of materials such as articles, charts, diagrams, and excerpts from longer texts. Always read everything in a course packet carefully. If the professor took the time to compile it, it is probably important.

Remember the Big Picture!

The reading assignments you do for your classes are not isolated exercises. Each piece you read is a part of the bigger picture: the particular course or subject. It is also a part of an even bigger picture: your general knowledge. In fact, even the reading you do outside of class contributes to your general knowledge. You learn something from everything you read, whether

it's a textbook, novel, or magazine article. Ask yourself what, exactly, are you learning from this piece? How is this text contributing to your overall knowledge? As long as you keep that big picture in view, you'll always be an active and effective reader.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Be an active reader; become involved with what you read.
 - For each reading assignment, know where you're headed and why.
 - Think while you read and after you read; ask yourself questions and write a response.
 - Throw away the highlighters; rely on your own notes about reading assignments.
 - Be a selective reader rather than a speed-reader. Prioritize your reading assignments in order of importance. If you can't read the entire assignment, skim it.
 - Be willing to work hard on difficult texts; don't use the "boredom" excuse.
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“I use my ‘free’ times or open blocks during my day for a variety of tasks. Sometimes I use it to study, read required texts, or do homework. Other times I reward myself and use free time to eat, relax, or socialize. It depends each day on how my tasks at hand line up, but I made the mistake early on of using free time to just hang out and my grades really suffered. I learned nothing really is ‘free’ in life!”

—**Alan T., Sophomore**

CHAPTER 9

Effective Study Skills

You need to adopt an effective study routine for everything you do. As a student, you are faced with many tasks, activities, and responsibilities; it is overwhelming. The key to making it all manageable is making it a matter of habit. The more routine something is, the less effort it requires. Think about your morning routine. You probably go through the same ritual every day—showering, brushing your teeth, and getting dressed—without thinking about it. If you also make study tasks a habit, they’ll come as easy as brushing your teeth.