Strategies for College Reading

As you may have already discovered, college reading is much more demanding and challenging than what you encountered in high school. You may feel unprepared for the amount and difficulty level of the readings, and the strategies that you succeeded with in high school may no longer work. While such strategies may vary considerably, what they have in common is that they are all largely passive approaches. They include:

o   Highlighting everything
o   Copying down pages of notes word-for-word from the text
o   Reading and re-reading passages without a clear purpose
o   Scanning pages without reading or interacting with the text

These passive strategies not only lead to trouble with focus, motivation, and retention, but often result in spending more time in the long run.

Increasing your comprehension and retention, meanwhile, requires a deeper level of engagement and interaction with texts. You can trick your brain into doing this by implementing **active reading strategies**. The rest of this document lays out a few such strategies (though it is by no means exhaustive!). Keep in mind, however, that not every one of them will work for you; nor will each be applicable to every academic discipline, course, or specific reading assignment. Ultimately, it is up to find an approach that works best for you or your specific purpose.

Active Learning Strategies for Close Reading

The following techniques fall are subdivided in three, based on when they can be best utilized during the reading process: before reading, while reading, and after reading (yes, *active* reading doesn't begin and end with actually reading the text!)

Pre-Reading

1. **Know your purpose.** Ask yourself: What will you be expected to do with the information that you gather from your reading? What class or discipline is this for? Is this for an exam, class discussion, or essay? What are some things you want to learn from the text, and what questions do you have that you hope to be able to answer while reading or after reading it? Your purpose for (and, therefore, your approach to) reading will vary considerably depending on your answers to these questions.

2. **Draw on your prior knowledge.** Consider and write down anything you know about your reading:
   - How does the topic of your reading relate to others you've read about for class?
   - How does it relate to what your instructor has talked about during lecture? Why do you think the instructor assigned this text?
   - Do you have any knowledge or experience from outside the course that relates to this reading?

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3. **Preview the text.** Skim the chapter, noting only headings, visuals, bolded or italicized words, and any summaries. In your own words, write down what you think the section or chapter will be about, and what you think the main ideas will be.

4. **Plan ahead.** Break your reading into smaller chunks by considering:
    - How fast you read while still retaining a high level of comprehension.
    - How long you have until the reading must be completed. Don't wait until the night before to start reading! Instead, apply time management strategies to plan out your reading based on your coursework and other obligations.

Reading

1. **Intentional skimming.** Perfect for when you are short on time, just need the main ideas, or are reviewing, this technique works best for non-fiction (textbooks, journal articles, essay, etc.), and can also be very useful when you are beginning your research for or writing a paper. While skimming, focus on the following:
    - Intro and conclusion
    - Titles, subtitles, headings
    - Chapter/section summaries
    - First and last sentences of sections and paragraphs
    - Bold/italicized words
    - Visuals

    For each paragraph or section, read only enough to determine if it presents a main idea or support for one. Keeping an eye out for signal words and phrases can be very helpful here. As you can see, this technique does NOT mean just flipping through pages mindlessly!

2. **Take notes.** See our [notetaking handout](#) for specific strategies. Whichever method you choose, remember that you should not just be copying down information; rather, be sure to put things in your own words, except for important quotes that you want to remember. This will keep your notes brief but focused.

3. **Annotate.** If you are someone who has a tendency to highlight everything or re-read texts over and over again, this is the technique for you! Annotating involves systematically organizing and summarizing important material within the document itself, most often in the margins. Your focus should be on the following:
    - Identifying key concepts by circling or highlighting (for more on this, see #4 below).
    - Summarizing important points
    - Adding comments and/or questions in the margins.
    - Exercising restraint – think and process before you begin annotating.

    While you may feel like you are spending a lot of extra time during this process, you are actually saving time in the long run, especially when it comes time to review.

4. **Highlighting.** This is one of the most popular reading strategies. However, in practice highlighting actually tends to be less effective than other techniques. This is because students often focus more on trying to distinguish between important and unimportant content, which gets in the way of higher-

order thinking and a critical, comprehensive understanding of the text. This "sorting" process can often become overwhelming, which results in students highlighting most of the text. Finally, many students use highlighted sections as a guide for their re-reading, which leads to fluency but not necessarily competence. Plus, if you are highlighting everything, how much time are you really saving? So, when highlighting, do the following:

- Wait to highlight until after you have finished reading a paragraph or section of the text. This will give you time to reflect on the concepts that are most important.
- Try to highlight only key words or phrases. If you feel like you need to highlight whole sentences, try to limit yourself to only one per paragraph.
- Color code for different kinds of information (e.g. blue for key words, yellow for important quotes, etc.)
- Go back and summarize concepts you've highlighted, either in the margins or in separate notes (for more on this, see #3 above).

5. **Summarize.** If you tend towards taking pages and pages of word-for-word notes, here's a new strategy. Once you have finished a paragraph or section, rephrase the main points and a few details that you remember from your reading. If you're having trouble, here's a good way to think about it: How would I explain this to a friend?

6. **Ask and answer questions.** This is an effective approach for those who have trouble with purposeful reading and/or skimming. Using the questions you wrote down during the pre-reading stage, think of some higher-level, critical thinking questions that an instructor might ask. Compare and contrast, agree or disagree, or 'What's most important' questions may prove a fruitful avenue for the purposes of this exercise.

7. **Self-reflect.** This is less a specific, discrete technique than a general approach that you should be doing throughout the reading process. From time to time, be sure to check in with yourself: Are you staying engaged with the reading? Do you understand and remember what you've been reading? Do you need a break, or perhaps a change of environment or reading strategy?

Post-Reading

1. **Review and test your knowledge.** Now is the time to go back over what you've done and check to see that you have fulfilled the purpose that you set out during pre-reading. Here are a few suggestions:

- Put away your text and notes, then write down what you remember from the reading, either in outline format or freeform.
- Discuss the reading with a friend/family member/classmate.
- Create a list of important concepts and some examples of each.
- Create a concept map or other visualization from memory.
- Create flashcards to test yourself on terms and main concepts.
- Take a practice quiz or test. These may be found in the text or provided by the instructor, but if not, you will most likely be able to find some online.
- Go back through your notes and try to answer any questions you wrote down while reading.

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2. **Go beyond the reading.** To get the most out of your reading (and your learning in general), it's important to look for ways to sustain your motivation past each discrete learning experience. When it comes to reading, digging deeper is a great way to achieve this. For example, you could take a look at other sources that were cited in the text. Or, you could search for (reputable) articles, videos, podcasts, and websites about important concepts or interesting ideas that you came across during your reading.

3. **Use your resources.** If anything is still unclear after your reading, don't be afraid to ask for help! Go to office hours. This time is dedicated to helping students like you, so take advantage! While it might seem scary at first, you will find that instructors and TAs are more than happy to help or to just talk about what interests you. Not only will you get your questions answered, but you will probably leave with an even deeper understanding of your reading, and the subject as a whole. In lieu of office hours, talk with classmates or any friends who have already taken the course, or go to a peer mentoring session or help desk if one is offered for the course.

SQ3R Method

This well-known active reading strategy is named for its five steps: **S**urvey, **Q**uestion, **R**ead, **R**ecall (or **R**ecite), and **R**eview.

Survey

Similar to #3 in Pre-Reading (above), skim the chapter, focusing on titles and headings, visuals, bolded and italicized terms, and summaries.

Question

Now that you have an idea of the information that will be presented, create a list of questions that will guide your reading. An easy way to do this is turning any titles, headings, and/or learning objectives into questions. For instance, "Newton's First Law of Motion" becomes "What is Newton's First Law of Motion?"

Read

A self-explanatory step, but be sure to utilize the active reading techniques discussed above!

Recall/Recite

Immediately after you have finished reading, put the reading and any notes away. Then, either write down or recite out loud all the information you remember from your reading. Being able to answer the questions you wrote down earlier is a good baseline, but feel free to also include all other pertinent and important information you absorbed while reading!

Review

Go back and compare the information you recalled in the previous step with your questions and reading notes, observing points you forgot about or remembered incorrectly. Then, anywhere from an hour to a day after completing these steps, and again periodically from there, go back and quickly review the reading or your notes. This not only helps you check your retention, but will also help solidify that information in your long-term memory.

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Further Reading:

https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/

http://gsi.berkeley.edu/gsi-guide-contents/critical-reading-intro/social-science/

http://lsc.cornell.edu/notes.html.

http://uaap.mit.edu/tutoring-support/study-tips/tooling-and-studying/tooling-and-studying-effective-reading-and-note-taking.

https://www.cornellcollege.edu/academic-support-and-advising/study-tips/reading-textbooks.shtml

https://student.unsw.edu.au/notemaking-written-text

http://success.oregonstate.edu/sites/success.oregonstate.edu/files/LearningCorner/Tools/preview_read_recall.pdf

http://willamette.edu/offices/lcenter/resources/study_strategies/reading2remember.html

https://www.ucc.vt.edu/academic_support/online_study_skills_workshops/SQ3R_improving_reading_comprehension.html