

How to Read a Textbook Effectively

Checklist of Symptoms

Do you often:

- Get bored or fall asleep when reading a textbook chapter?
- Feel that you haven't remembered a thing after you finish reading a chapter?
- Get poor grades in courses that require reading textbook material?
- Get poor grades on chapter tests when you think that you knew the material?
- Spend several hours rereading a chapter in a textbook?

If you checked one or more of these symptoms, you need to read this introduction carefully.

A large amount of your college reading consists of reading and learning the information in textbooks. They are not the most interesting books to read, but they are often the most predictable. Sections are clearly divided and subdivided into boldface print and italics; study questions often come at the end of the chapter; charts and illustrations usually represent the most important facts and concepts discussed in the chapter; and usually the style of textbook material is straightforward. With the right system, reading textbook material can prove to be a worthwhile study experience.

Surveying the Entire Text

Surveying is a major study-reading step, because, like preview skimming, it prepares you for what you are to read.

If you are reading a textbook for the first time, get to know the book by:

Reading the preface. It gives the author's reasons for writing the book, the topics covered, and the audience that the textbook is written for--items that will help you read the chapters efficiently.

Studying the table of contents to see how it is organized. Look at its divisions and subdivisions. The textbook's overall organization will help you understand how the author thinks about the material that he or she is presenting.

Thumbing through the index to see the number and types of words listed.

Looking to see if there is a glossary or appendix. See whether you will need to refer to charts or graphs as you read various chapters of the textbook.

Noting if there is an answer key at the end of the book or at the end of each chapter. Are answers given to all problems, or only to odd- or even-numbered problems?

Reading through a few pages at the beginning, middle, and end of the textbook to get a sense of the author's style and the difficulty level of the textbook. Does the author use a difficult vocabulary? Are the sentences complicated and hard to follow?

Reading a Textbook Chapter

You will find it easier to read, understand, and remember the information in your textbook if you develop and consistently apply a system for studying each chapter. The two keys to the system presented below are 1) frequent skimming and previewing to discover organizational patterns, and 2) dividing the reading into progressively smaller and more manageable pieces.

STEP 1 Survey/Preview the Chapter (Skim the entire chapter.)

Skim to create a background and to activate prior knowledge.
Skim to get an overview of the organization.
Skim to overcome inertia and get started on the assignment.

STEP 2 Skim each section before reading that section carefully (Skim one section.)

Read introductory paragraphs.
Look for boldface words.

STEP 3 Carefully read/underline/highlight each section (paragraph by paragraph).

Use self-questioning techniques.
Look for:

- a. definitions
- b. methods
- c. sequences
- d. cause-effect relationships
- e. comparison-contrast

REPEAT STEPS 2 AND 3 FOR EACH SECTION OF THE CHAPTER.

STEP 4 Decide what to study (entire chapter)

Based on:

- a. class notes
- b. instructor comments
- c. old tests
- d. former students' advice

Make text notes or marginal notes.

STEP 5 Review/Recite

This is the most important step! Don't delay!
Review immediately, during the same study session.