

Improving your Reading and Note-taking Techniques Learning Objectives:

Use techniques to give your reading a specific purpose, and which help you remember and retain the information more easily.

Read for Meaning:

Reading Strategies “Reading” the World Around You

Everywhere you go you are presented with images that require you to make sense of them. You “read” these stimuli, even though you might not be aware of it, or indeed you might not really consider it reading. For example, when you make sense of pictures, advertisements (visual and/or written), directions or traffic signs, you are in effect “reading” their message. In a more specific sense, however, reading is an active process where you make meaning of written symbols on a page (or computer screen). All readers do this. Even young children (emergent readers) will try to make sense of words they don't actually know, for example they will read “home” for house because they understand the context.

Reading for Enjoyment or Interest

It is important to be aware that this activity of taking in information, processing it, and making sense of it, is a normal everyday activity of your everyday life. You read for a variety of reasons: for enjoyment, interest, or information. For instance, you might be an avid reader of fact, fiction, sports magazines, or current affairs, and so on. However, much of the time, you will not bother to retain what you have read. You may have a general if somewhat vague idea of the content, unless of course you found it extremely interesting. This is often the case when you really “get into” a good book, where you are likely to remember it in great detail, as you feel a personal involvement with the characters, events, or ideas put forward.

Reading for Study Purposes When it comes to following a course of study, however, you will most likely have other concerns about reading. These can include the amount or volume of reading required, and whether you will have enough time to read it all and take it in. Then there maybe issues around the level of difficulty of the reading material. This may be with style or syntax, that is, the way it is written. Or indeed it may be with content, the issues under discussion, and the level of difficulty in both understanding and remembering the material. You may also find technical language or “jargon” off-putting and incomprehensible.

Reading, then, is much more than just decoding signs on a page.

When you read, you actively try to make sense of what you read, and you remember more easily if you are interested or feel involved in the process. You can build on these natural advantages when you are studying. First of all, the topic is interesting to you because you have chosen to do it, and you will remember more easily when you are interested in the material. Accept that some topics or subjects will have a particular style and get used to reading different styles. Where specialist language is used, have a glossary (a page containing technical terms and their meanings) beside you for reference when necessary. But always, always approach a textbook with a definite purpose. Reading that has a specific purpose or intention has a very powerful effect on memory. Your brain is already geared towards looking for something and making sense of it. You will see that this is something you can capitalise on when you are reading for a purpose.

Benefits of Active Reading:

Research Findings The benefits of this active, information seeking approach to reading can be clearly seen from the results of research that was carried out on efficient (expert) learners. The results showed that they all followed certain patterns in their reading behaviour.

1. They looked for information that was directly related to their goals (They had a clear purpose before they started reading, and that purpose helped them to identify what they were looking for).
2. They searched forwards and backwards when looking for a particular piece of information, and tried to guess ahead about information in the text.
3. They summarised important or central points often, often by making notes or writing in the margin.
4. They re-read any sentences/parts that they found difficult or unclear.
5. They had questions already prepared so that they were searching for specific information as opposed to reading blankly, hoping to somehow absorb all the information.
6. They evaluated new information from the text in light of what they already knew.
7. They checked their progress and understanding in light of what they already knew.

This is a very good template for the apprentice reader, or indeed for any reader who wishes to improve his or her reading capabilities. Practise the techniques suggested above. You will find it very helpful if you have a lot of reading to do, particularly if you have not read much to date, or you are finding the content and style of your reading material somewhat difficult. Reminder: You are reading to widen your knowledge on a given topic, to develop your thinking, and to weave new information or ideas into your existing store of knowledge and understanding. Reading for a specific purpose or intention has a very

powerful effect on memory. Be selective in your reading, as you cannot expect to read everything on a given subject. You remember more easily when you are actively looking for answers to specific questions or topics, and when you are interested in the material. Always use an active approach to your reading.

A Better Way to Read:

Techniques for Easier, More Efficient Reading There are different strategies you can use when reading. Depending on the context, find and use the one that best suits the specific task in hand. This section briefly explains the techniques involved.

It is based on the SQ3R system. Basically these are the steps involved:

1. Skim read to get an overview of the information and to alert your brain.
2. Have questions prepared, so that you know what information you seek.
3. Re-read with increased focus and attention, and make notes.
4. Recall what you have learned, using summarising techniques.
5. Review the learned information as soon as you can, but within 24 hours for increased efficiency.

Skimming (sometimes called “speed reading”)

This is where you “surface” read very quickly to get the “gist” of a topic or an overview of the chapter/story/instructions/experiment/other. It is usually a preliminary read, and if you find the information you require, you follow up with close reading for detailed information, where you will most likely make notes.

Where you are looking for specific answers to information, use the technique of scanning. Because you know exactly what questions you want answered, you speed-read and your eyes scan over the words/pages very quickly until they find what they are looking for. Then, rather like in a radar signal, the brain is alerted and focuses in on the details you require.

Close Reading

This is when you have pinpointed what you need. Now you read with increased focus and attention, and it is at this stage that you will most likely make notes. If you are given questions at the end of the passage to guide you through the passage, then use these to find out the answers, otherwise have 2-3 questions prepared for which you need to find answers. Your purpose for reading may be to introduce you to, or increase your knowledge on a given subject or topic. The key is to know what your purpose is, and to be prepared before you start.

The SQ3R method in more detail:

1. Preview/ Survey/ Overview

- This is rather like a trailer for a film or video, but you are the one “scouting” for information. It gives you an overall sense of what lies ahead, whether you are looking at a book or a section of a book. Skim or speed-read to get a preview of what you will be studying, and how it is organised.
- Pay particular attention to the introductions or conclusions, and look at any headings, diagrams or pictures that accompany the text. Examine the text layout, and note where points are emphasised or “signposted” for you, for example with phrases like, “to summarise” or “of central /prime importance”. It will give you a general idea “the gist” of the main concerns of the chapter or book and prepare your brain for the task ahead.

2. Question • Always have questions ready before you start. This preparedness is the key to active learning. Use the questions given at the end of a chapter or section. Or you can make them up yourself if you need to, and they can be as simple as: What do I know about the subject already? What is the chapter or section about? What are the main points or ideas? (Usually 3 -5) What evidence is there to support (or oppose) these views? Are these facts or opinions? Are they justified? Up to date?

3. Read ‘n’ Write

- Re-read the chapter. Try to pinpoint a “topic sentence” which summarises the most important point in a paragraph or chapter. Even better, make one up yourself. This is the sentence that tells you what the main point of the section is.
- Slow down if you come to a difficult passage. Skip backwards and forwards to see if the point becomes clearer, or to check if it is explained in more detail later on.
- Re-read the material until you are sure you understand it.
- Write down any information that seems to provide answers to your study questions in your own words; that is, summarise it.
- Note any difficult words or technical terms: look them up later if you can follow what is being said, or if you can’t, look them up now.

4. Recall

- Check your understanding of what you have read throughout. Can you recall what you have learned?
- Go through the main ideas you have read so far. Do they make sense to you?
- Check your notes or summary sheets and make sure you have included all relevant information. If not, do so at this stage.
- Summarise again, in your own words, the main points of all you have learned in this session. These will double your retention and learning recall power.

5. Review

- Go over your notes within 24 hours, and perhaps a week later, and again regularly during the course of the term/year. This might seem excessive, but if you do not review newly learned material within a certain time you can forget up to 80% of what you learned in the first place.
- Remind yourself of the questions you wanted answered. This will gear you up for finding answers.
- Do your notes give you the answers?
- Check them to see if you have answered everything, and if your notes are accurate. Rechecking information will fill in any gaps or blanks in your notes or in your memory.
- Make up a topic sentence (or sentences) to summarise your summary. This is a sort of “super shorthand”, (or super text message). You reduce all you’ve learned to the smallest possible sentences without distorting the meaning. These “text” sentences become a “prompt” or external memory of your learning. They are useful both for assignments and for examination preparation: (brain fodder).

6. Highlighting or Underlining: A Colourful Habit

- It can be very useful to highlight or underline important points in your textbooks, but it is not an alternative to note taking. Also, if you re-read the text, other “new” points stand out, so you underline them, and end up with a section totally underlined, but still no notes! So, if you underline, use it only as a reminder of where you want to make notes. However, remember not to underline or highlight library books or any borrowed material.