Reading Strategies

Most of the material you will encounter in a course will be text-based. A successful student in any course uses active reading skills. This section outlines some reading strategies to improve your understanding of course material. These strategies can be applied to any written material; the focus of this section is on reading and reviewing academic and technical materials because that is the kind of text you will most likely encounter in your courses.

Check your understanding.

How do you know if you have understood something you’re read? Here are some questions to ask yourself as you are reading to assess how well you understand the text.

What if you don’t understand what you read?

You can certainly ask your instructor and/or other students for help in understanding any course material. Here are some tips you can use to improve your understanding of academic and technical texts.

Preview the text

To preview any course material, take a moment before reading to do the following:

- Assess the difficulty of the material.
- Discover how it is organized.
- Identify the overall subject and how it is approached.
- Establish what type of material it is (for example practical, theoretical, historical background or a case study).
- Look for logical breaking points where you might divide the reading into sections, especially if you only have short blocks of time in which to study.
- Look for connections between the material and previous course content.

Previewing is an important step because course material can often deal with unfamiliar subject matter about which you have little or no background knowledge. Previewing is useful because it helps you make decisions about how to approach the material. Previewing gets your mind “in gear,” gives you a mental outline of the topic, and alerts you to what you already know.

(Adapted with permission from Study and Thinking Skills in College, by Kathleen T. McWhorter, 1988).
Establish your purpose for reading.

Why are you reading course texts or recommended websites? Your purpose for reading affects how you approach the material. Are you reading:

- to learn overall concepts such as background information to help you understand the next topic?
- to learn detailed information?
- to learn how to do a procedure?
- to evaluate the author's perspective or compare it with another author's viewpoint?

Once you know why you are reading, you are more likely to know when you have accomplished your reading goal. When you have accomplished that goal, you should stop reading.

For overall concepts, you may only need to read headings and introductory and summary paragraphs and look at diagrams.

If you are reading to learn the parts and functions of a complex system, like the circulatory system in the body, you will need to read and review the material several times. You may even need to sketch and label parts of the system in order to know it well enough to be able to use that information.

Pace yourself for your purpose.

When previewing a chapter, website, or other text, skim quickly over headings, diagrams, illustrations, and highlighted text. You can read rapidly if you are reading to learn important ideas or overall concepts. Be prepared to read detailed information more slowly. You may have to reread diagrams, graphs, or descriptions of procedures several times. If you are reading unfamiliar topics, you should skim over the material once to get a mental outline of the topic and then read it again carefully so you will gain a better understanding of the material.

Identify what you already know.

You learn more easily if you can connect new information to what you already know. Search your previous experience and knowledge for ideas to connect to the new material. You will find you are more likely to remember new information that is connected to what you already know. This step can also draw your attention to gaps in what you already know or mismatches between new information and your existing understanding. Those gaps or mismatches are an opportunity to ask questions. If you are not sure that the connection you've made between new and previous knowledge is sound, check your thinking with your instructor.

Paraphrase in your own words.

If you can express the author's ideas in your own words, you understand them. If you find yourself using only the author's words, then you need to do more work to integrate those ideas into your own understanding. Read the text carefully and focus on the ideas and relationships between ideas rather than the words used to express them.

Use the graphics in your text.
Graphics such as drawings, tables, charts, or diagrams in academic or technical material usually contain important information. Refer frequently to graphics when reading text that discusses or explains the information that they are representing. Take time to connect the written explanation to the specific parts of the graphic.

**Visualize while you read.**

Create mental images of the process, procedure, or topic described in the text. Imagine yourself performing the procedure and focus on the details or steps throughout. Imagining a written description can improve your memory, especially if you prefer to learn about a procedure by seeing a demonstration of it rather than reading about it.

**Apply what you're learning.**

As you read, take time to think of examples that illustrate the idea in the text. Apply the concept to situations you are familiar with, such as your own work context. Think about how you would explain the idea to someone else and ways you would link the idea to a knowledge they already have. Draw a picture to represent the idea and how you understand it.