

Reading Textbooks

The Purpose of the Textbook

Just as lectures have different roles in different courses, textbooks have different roles in different courses. Your approach to your textbook will depend on this role.

Sometimes, the textbook serves as the primary source of information for a course. In this case, the lectures and other classroom activities are meant to reinforce the material of the textbook, and you will likely spend a lot of time reading and studying the textbook. More commonly though, the textbook is meant to help you understand the material of the lecture. In this case, you will use the textbook only as much as you need to in order to understand—and be prepared for—the lecture.

SQ3R

Reading effectively requires that you read actively. One of the classic methods for reading actively is known as SQ3R, which in this case stands for Survey, ask Questions, Read, Recall, and Review. We'll describe each in turn.

1. Survey

a. Surveying the text

When you first use your textbook, get to know it before diving into the first assigned reading. First, familiarize yourself with general features, such as who the authors are and the age and place of publication. Next, read the preface. Knowing something about the authors and their purpose in writing the text can help you to relate more personally to the text. Finally, become familiar with the organization of the textbook. How does the table of contents correspond to your course outline? What information is available at the end of the book? How is each chapter laid out, and what learning aids are available within each chapter?

b. Surveying the chapter or assigned reading

It is very important to become familiar with what you are about to read before reading it. Otherwise, you may become lost in the details. Before reading, first survey the headings, taking care to think about them and how they are organized. Part of this is noticing that there are different levels of headings and

What was that, again?

Have you ever had the experience of reading a textbook and realizing that you have just read a number of pages without having any recollection of what you have just read? Or have you ever noticed that your eyes have been moving over the words, but you have been thinking of something else? This is actually quite common, and fortunately there are strategies for making your reading much more effective and efficient.

subheadings. Look also at the objectives at the beginning of the chapter, and think about what you already know in relation to those objectives. You can also read any chapter summaries that might be provided—whether or not they occur at the beginning or at the end of the chapter. Other things to look at include glossaries of key words, diagrams through the chapter, and questions at the end of the chapter. All of these will help to engage your mind.

2. Ask questions

In order to read for purpose, it is useful to create questions about the material that you are about to read. The most common source of questions is headings and subheadings. So, for example, when seeing the heading "Digestive Systems" in a biology text, you could ask questions such as the following:

- What are the parts of the digestive system?
- How do the parts work together?
- How do the digestive systems of different animals differ?

It is often a good idea to write your questions down, either on a separate piece of paper, or more likely, right next to the heading in the text.

Although headings are likely to be your primary source of questions, there are other good possibilities. Particularly if there are no or few headings, consider asking questions about the first sentence in each paragraph or about words in bold. Further, questions at the end of the chapter or in study guides can be very useful to consider prior to reading.

Again, creating questions helps to engage your mind and to make you an active reader.

3. Read selectively

Now that you've created some questions for each section, review your question or questions prior to reading. While reading—and here's the important part—look for the answer to your question(s). Clearly, while looking for the answer to your question, you will take in other information. After all, you need to process and understand the information that you are reading sufficiently to know whether or not it contains the answer. Most importantly, your mind is active in this process. While reading, you will likely wish to make notes of some sort, whether they be through highlighting, margin notes, or notes on a separate piece of paper. Here are some points to keep in mind when taking notes:

- Take notes only after reading a chunk of material. If you take notes while reading, you are likely to highlight too much.
- Remember your purpose for taking notes—typically so you can study from them. Thus, notes are best if they highlight a cue for recall so that when you study, you can look at the highlighted material and test yourself on the details associated with that

