



LEARNING TOOLS

READING COMPREHENSION

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Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the amount of reading you have? Do you struggle to stay focused and motivated while reading? Do you sometimes find it hard to understand and remember what you read? If so, you're not alone. Many students experience these challenges because college reading can be demanding, time-consuming, and significantly more rigorous than high school. However, with some practical strategies, you can make your reading time meaningful, focused, and productive.

Active reading

Research indicates that you retain more information when actively engaging with texts rather than just reading and re-reading without a specific purpose. Many students can relate to a type of reading that involves copying pages of notes verbatim or skimming through pages without genuinely engaging with them. While these two methods are on opposite ends of the spectrum, neither effectively engages your brain in a way that fosters deep understanding and retention. Active reading applies effective strategies that compel your brain to interact with the text before, during, and after reading, helping you assess what you are (and aren't) learning more effectively.

Before reading

Although many students overlook this step, engaging with a text before reading can enhance your understanding and retention. Below are some active reading strategies to implement before you begin reading.

Know your purpose

Although you might be reading due to your professor's assignment, there's a deeper purpose. How will you utilize the information from your reading task? Preparing for a multiple-choice exam requires a sharper focus on details—like keywords, definitions, dates, and specific concepts and examples—compared to reading for discussion or essay writing, emphasizing primary ideas and their connections. Reflect on your reading intent and what you need to comprehend, learn, or achieve afterward. Maintain this objective as you engage with the text.

Integrate prior knowledge

You possess a wealth of knowledge; why not leverage it? Before previewing the text, reflect on what you already understand about the material. Explore how this reading ties into other course subjects, and ponder why your professor might have chosen this particular text. Think of any personal experiences or second-hand knowledge that connects to the topic. Compile a list of aspects you wish to learn about the text or questions you aim to answer during your reading.

Preview the text

Refrain from jumping in immediately. Instead, take a moment to glance over the text, focusing on headings, diagrams, tables, images, emphasized words, summaries, and key questions. Consider reading the introductions and conclusions to grasp the main ideas. After previewing, attempt to anticipate the section or chapter's content and recognize the key concepts.

Plan to break your reading into manageable chunks

Can you spare five days to read twenty pages? Read four pages each evening. Can you not finish twenty pages in one night? Read four pages, then enjoy a fifteen-minute break to refresh your mind and stretch your body. Taking breaks while reading improves focus, boosts

motivation, enhances understanding, and aids retention. Additionally, it's beneficial for our health! Consider using a weekly planner to schedule and structure your time.

Decide whether and how to read from a screen

Certain materials like journal articles and e-textbooks may be available in digital formats when participating in online courses or remote studies. Before diving in, consider whether you'd like to print the content; many find it easier to grasp information on paper. If printing isn't feasible or preferred, take breaks while reading, adjust your screen settings, and select optimal reading times to help minimize eye strain or headaches.

While reading

Staying mentally engaged while reading helps minimize distractions, wandering thoughts, and misunderstandings. Try employing these techniques to maintain focus and critically analyze the material as you read.

Self-monitor

Only you can guarantee your engagement while reading! If you are preoccupied with dinner plans or the next episode of your favorite Netflix series, your focus has slipped away! When you realize your thoughts are wandering, stop and assess your needs. Do you require a break? Is there a more interactive method to connect with the material? Do you prefer background noise or some movement? Would listening to the text help? Perhaps a different setting would make a difference? Before continuing, recap the last section you recall to confirm your ideal starting point.

Annotate

Are you relying too much on the highlighter? Set it aside and consider using annotations instead. Create a system or key to identify the following in the text: key ideas, critical points, unfamiliar terms, unclear information, essential phrases, and connections.

Summarize

Once you read brief excerpts from the texts—such as several paragraphs, a page, or content under a specific heading—condense the main ideas and two or three essential details in your own words. These summaries can help build a framework for your notes while you read.

After reading

Finishing a chapter doesn't mean the reading experience is over. Effective after-reading strategies can improve your comprehension and help you remember the material longer.

Check in with yourself

Regardless of whether you engage with printed material or a digital document, the most critical factor to assess is the extent of your comprehension of the content. This metacognitive ability is among the most difficult to cultivate, as you might not recognize that you've misunderstood the message until you're in class—or, even worse, on the day of the exam.

Here are various methods to assess your reading comprehension. Consider comparing the material you read with more straightforward texts on the same topic and sharing your insights with colleagues. If you and your colleagues have notably different interpretations, revisit the text to determine if the way evidence is presented explains these differences. Some key questions:

- Are there several viable answers to this question?

- Do you have any gaps in your understanding of the topic?
- Is the language in the text excessively complicated or ambiguous?
- Are different sources on the same subject using consistent terms or varying terminology to address similar ideas?

Show what you know

- Create a memory-based text outline, starting with the main points and adding details, leaving gaps to fill in facts or information later.
- Discuss the material with a friend or classmate to enhance understanding.
- Reach out to a family member and explain what you've learned to them.
- Perform a brain dump: write down everything you remember from the reading within five minutes.
- Ask critical questions about the reading and provide answers within a specified time frame.
- Identify essential concepts from the text, offering examples and counterexamples for each.
- Develop a concept map from memory to represent your grasp of the reading visually.
- Take screenshots of digital texts to use as a foundation for class notes or annotations.

Self-test

- Develop flashcards or an outline for the key concepts, terms, dates, etc., from the text.
- Utilize the flashcards or outline to quiz yourself on what you've read, assessing how much you can remember and accurately explain.
- Conceal the answers or explanations and refrain from viewing them until you've provided your answers or explanations.

- Pause videos periodically and use your knowledge to provide an answer or anticipate the video's direction. Then, resume playback to check if you're on track.
- Testing yourself in this manner will enhance your ability to synthesize and process the information, allowing for better recall in the future.

Are you looking for help with active reading strategies? Book a session with an Academic Coach or register for one of our reading workshops at the Learning Center. Our academic coaches are here to evaluate your reading habits, explore practical strategies, develop a tailored plan, and support you in executing it.