

# Reading for True Understanding

Many students make the mistake of picking up their textbook and reading 50 pages straight through front to back and assuming they are done with their reading assignment. These students will often struggle to participate actively in class discussion and may not do well on the tests. There are better methods for getting the most out of your reading.

## The basics:

Multiply the number of pages you have to read by 5 minutes. That is the amount of time the average college student needs to spend on their reading assignment. Keep this in mind as you schedule time to do your reading. If you calculate four hours of reading, you might not want to read 7-11 p.m. straight through. Consider getting an hour in before class in the morning or over the lunch break - spread it out a bit.

Divide the reading into 10-page chunks. The system described below should be done on the 10-page chunk before you move to the next set of pages and start the method over again.

Have a highlighter in hand, a pen or pencil and paper or notecards (depending on your preference). Writing in the book itself is highly recommended, but if you have some reason for not doing that, you might also want post-its and use those on each page in place of writing in the book. If the book is already highlighted by a previous reader (not ideal situation) please use a highlighter of a different color.

**The system:**

- Preview**
- Read Actively (includes reading, highlighting, note-taking)**
- Review**

Let's take a closer look. Feel free to grab a textbook to use as example as you read this portion.

## Preview:

You would most likely not travel to another country without getting a lay of the land first. Often we read a tourism book or look at a map. We might try to learn a few words in the other language. If the country is similar to our own (England speaks the same language as the U.S. so feels more familiar) we might do less preparation than if it seems very different from our own (Japan has an alphabet/language quite different from the U.S.). This advance preparation allows us to get off the plane and have a sense of what we know and don't know, what questions we will need to ask and where we want to head first.

Previewing a textbook accomplishes much the same thing. Start by looking at the beginning of your 10-page chunk. Read section titles. If no titles, read first lines of paragraphs. Read the last paragraph. Glance over charts or photos used on the pages. Read study questions or summaries that might be given at the end of the chunk of pages. Now, take a moment to think about what you have just seen. What do you think will be the main topic of that section? What do you already know about it from your childhood, past courses or other readings in this current class? What is your biggest question right now--what more do you need to know?

Now, you have a sense of where you are heading. Hopefully, you are a bit curious about what you will be reading, have some questions in your mind and will be able to fit what you read into a bigger context of where it fits into the whole chapter.

### **Read Actively:**

Do not take notes or highlight as you read; this tends to break up your flow and diminish your understanding. It also isn't very productive, because you don't know if the first sentence is worth taking notes on until after you have read the third sentence, which might be the real point of the paragraph. So, read at least one complete paragraph or a short section before you stop to take notes and highlight.

Your first step after you read the paragraph is to highlight a phrase or two that were the important parts that you'll need to know for future reference. Don't pick just words (too little) or whole sentences (too much). Exceptions to this might be dates or definitions. The idea is that you could re-read JUST the highlighted portion in a month and get the gist of the paragraph without having to re-read the whole paragraph.

Now go to the margins (or your post-its) and start writing a question or two for the paragraph. This might be "What years were considered the Renaissance?" or "What is the meaning of metamorphosis?" When you get done with the entire ten page section, you will go back and try to answer these questions without looking at the book. If you need to cheat and look at the book, you should underline those highlighted notes to show that you need to study that more. If you could answer it, you are doing well on recalling that paragraph.

This is also a good time to make some notes for class. Take a sheet of paper or a notecard and write down questions that you want to ask in class (to understand a concept or to ask how it connects to something else you've read, etc.). Write down any observations or opinions you want to share with the class. You may want to jot down page numbers and quotes that may be useful to discuss in class.

Some people prefer to also make these notes in their margins or at the end of the chapter. That is fine.

Now read the next paragraph or short section (one column, for example) and do the same process as above.

## **Review:**

At the end of the ten-page chunk, take a moment and think about the section you have read in its entirety. Go to a clean sheet of paper or a reading journal and jot down a summary (in your own words, not quotes from book) of what you just read. Then make some broad observations about how it connects to other things you knew or have read or any feelings you might have about what you've read.

Go back and try to answer the questions in the margins.  
Now start the whole thing over with the next 10-pages.

When you have finished the entire reading assignment, finish up your reading journal and comprehensive thoughts and organize your note-cards or split sheet of paper so you are ready for class tomorrow.

## **Basic Things to Keep in Mind When Reading:**

Faculty members do not assign reading as busy work. They feel the material is valuable. So, approach it with as much energy and creativity as you can muster. If it is not a class that particularly excites you, try to relate it to something that does. A great example might be physics and baseball. You'd be surprised at how much science can apply to things like the trajectory of a ball or the impact needed on the bat to make a ball go a certain distance, etc. If you are in doubt, ask the professor to help you relate the topic to something you do enjoy and he or she might be able to help you connect the dots. You might also consider your future career and whether you could make use of this knowledge in small talk or in background knowledge for that type of job.

If something is not making sense, try reading it out loud. That can often help you process the material in a new way.

Try to keep your notes in your own words, not the words from the book. This helps you avoid plagiarism in papers and helps you think more about the reading which will, in turn, help you retain the material for tests or when it comes time to write a paper.

If you run into vocabulary words you do not know, try to look up the important ones. If there are concepts or the book refers to an event you've never heard of, look at credo reference or Oxford reference on the library's main webpage.