

Educational and Career Counseling Center

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Developing Effective Textbook Reading Skills

Reading, reading, reading, and more reading. The life of a Ferris State University student involves lots and lots of reading. A typical week may involve reading one-to-two chapters of a textbook, per class, which totals 5+ chapters a week. It is important to develop a plan so you can accomplish all of your reading, homework and studying for all of your classes plus still have time for a life.

Reading well is one of the most important skills you need. Good reading skills will help you understand, learn and remember new material and they also help you write better.

Why do the reading?

The goal of reading at the university level is to learn new concepts, extract main ideas, become familiar with new vocabulary and learn information about a topic. Getting the reading done **before** the lecture will help significantly with note taking during class, understanding the professor and remembering information.

Scheduling Reading

Start reading as soon as you get the textbook! It is very difficult to catch up on reading once you fall behind. Reading should be scheduled into your week. Block times during the week when you are going to focus on reading. You should be setting up your weekly schedule to include some reading for each and every class, every single day.

Divide up a chapter based on the number of pages, your familiarity with the topic and also your attention span. If you can only really focus for 30 minutes of reading, then don't make yourself read for longer than that. You won't remember what you read, which ends up being a waste of time.

Reading should be done in a **distraction-free area**. This means no TV, radio, CD's, music, computer games, friends, instant messaging, etc and it certainly does not mean reading in the middle of a noisy cafeteria!

Textbook Reading Tips:

Active Reading: SQ4R – A Reading Strategy

The key to being a good and successful reader is to make reading an **active** process, instead of simply passively moving your eyes along the page. You need to work at understanding what you are reading, search for main details, link ideas together, and understand new vocabulary. The goal is to try to do all of this while only reading the chapter once. You don't have time to re-read. The following reading strategy can help you become a more active reader.

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S – Survey: Preview the chapter before reading it. Read the introduction to get an idea of what will be covered in the chapter. Scan the headings and subheading, pictures, graphs, etc. Get a feel for what the chapter is about and also how long you expect it to take to read. Divide the chapter into sections. This will help you to plan how long you need to read each section. Consider it your map for each chapter you need to read.

Q – Question: Before reading, turn the headings and subheadings into questions that you will try to find the answer to while reading. Write them down. This makes reading more active because you are doing something with the information. An example of a heading you might find in a Sociology text is “Ethnocentrism”. Turning this into a question could give you “What is ethnocentrism?”. If ethnocentrism was a subheading under the heading “Culture”, the question could be “What is ethnocentrism and how does it affect culture?”.

R – Read: Now it is time to read! While reading a section, try to answer the question you created. Look for main ideas, new vocabulary and try to link information with other things you have learned so far (from the professor’s lectures and the text). Don’t just passively move your eyes along the lines of the page. THINK about what you are reading and what it means. The more you can relate it to something you already know, the more likely you are to remember it.

R – Recite/Rephrase: Once you have read a section and found the answer to your question (which should be the main idea of the paragraph/section), ask yourself if you understand it. The key to knowing if you understand or not is if you can *rephrase the idea in your own words*. If you can’t do it, you probably don’t have a good enough grasp of the concept. Read it over again and look at any examples that are provided.

R – (W)rite: Now write down the answer to your questions and any other important points that you feel are worth studying and remembering. Try not to just copy – put things in your own words. It is easier to remember something that is in our words than something that is in someone else’s. There is no need to write complete sentences. Use points as much as possible. One of the major goals of creating these notes is to condense the information as much as possible.

R – Review: Once you have pulled out the main ideas from the text and written them down, you no longer need the textbook. Spend your time reviewing the notes that you have made. It is much easier to work with a condensed version of the information. Review your notes regularly so that you will not have to re-learn everything by the time the midterm and exam come along.

Reading Speed and Comprehension

It is important that you engage in a reading technique that is appropriate for the task at hand. How fast or slow you need to read a text will depend on what that text is being used for. The way you read a novel or a newspaper will be different from the way you read a textbook in which you are required to know the information thoroughly. For comprehension

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and retention, a slow, careful pace might be time-consuming but it is necessary. It is better to spend an hour on five pages and understand the material, then spend an hour on fifty pages and remember nothing. It is important to gauge beforehand how well you need to know the information; there is no need to spend hours memorizing every detail of a chapter when all that is needed is a general understanding of its concepts.

Concentration: To make efficient use of your time it is important to plan your reading sessions for times when your energy and concentration are high (reading early in the morning, late in the evening, and anytime of the day on your bed can make you sleepy and easily distracted).

Working with Difficult Textbooks: Strategies to improve your comprehension of difficult textbooks:

- **Know the subject's terminology.** Take time to review and learn the definitions of the special terms which are important in the discipline and/or textbook. You may need to consult a specialty dictionary in the reference section of the Library, as a regular dictionary often doesn't provide more than a basic definition.
- **Know the basics.** If a course or text seems "above your head" it's possible that you lack the basic understanding that is required to understand the material. If you're struggling, talk to your instructor to ensure that you have the necessary prerequisites and prior knowledge expected for the course. To increase your knowledge, you may wish to check the library for an introductory book on the subject.
- **Reading out loud.** For some people, reading out loud helps to improve their comprehension of difficult material. If this works for you, reading out loud with a classmate while taking turns analyzing, explaining, and summarizing the text can also help you to improve your comprehension-- another person's perspective can help to clarify a concept.
- **Trying multiple texts.** It is possible that the text you are reading is poorly written, or the author's style is difficult for you. Although you can't abandon the required text, to make an incomprehensible text more accessible, it may be helpful to find another text on the subject to help you clarify and understand the concepts.

Putting Together Text and Lecture Notes: In classes where it is important that material from the text and lecture are learned together, integrating your notes is an important study strategy. Mapping and diagramming are ways of putting text and lecture material together. At the end of a lecture or chapter, draw a diagram or chart that summarizes how the lecture and text material fit together. By re-organizing and integrating information from lectures and textbooks, you'll improve your retention of material by seeing it in a different format.