



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

## STEPS FOR TEXTBOOK READING

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This handout describes steps for reading your textbook in preparation for tests. Other purposes for reading, such as reading for participation in discussion or reading for doing research for a paper, are not included here.

The question of how to read a textbook may seem pretty straight forward – you just open your book and read. However, there are strategies you can use that will help you get better results from your reading and save you time too. This is not speed reading; instead it is strategic reading. This handout describes steps that students have found to increase learning and save time.

One Douglas College student reported that after getting only 60% on her first midterm, she used this process, and she increased her grade on her second midterm to 90%. Not only did she make that huge improvement, but she also spent only half the time on her reading that she had earlier in the semester! This may not be typical, but it is possible.

The best way to use this handout is to apply it step-by-step to a reading assignment you need to do. So, get out a course textbook and get ready to use it. Your first time through this process may take a little longer than it normally would, so don't give up on that score. Once you get used to it, it will definitely save you time.

Here are the steps for reading a chapter or section of a textbook:

1. Think about Purpose
2. Pre-read
3. Section
4. Read Actively
5. Produce Study Material
6. Study the Material You've Produced

On the following pages, each step in the process is described. Tasks are provided to help you practice the steps one at a time with a tutor or on your own. Practice will help you understand and evaluate the usefulness of each step.

## 1. Think about Your Purpose for Reading

Briefly consider what you need to get out of your reading. What kind of tests or exams will you need to write?

- Will they be multiple choice? If so, you will need a fairly detailed ability to recognize the information on the test. You will not need to be able to recall the information on your own.
- Will they be essay tests? If so, you will primarily need to recall main ideas. You will probably not need very specific details. The big picture will be more important.
- Will they be application tests? This is a test where you have to apply knowledge more than just repeat back what you've learned. Application tests include most tests in Math as well as tests with case studies such as you get in Business or Nursing. For such tests, you not only need a full understanding of the information but you also need practice in applying what you know.
- Will the tests be a mixture of the above?

If you don't know anything about the tests you'll write in the course, it's worthwhile to do some detective work. If you've already written a test for the instructor, that can give you valuable information about the kinds of questions asked and the test format the instructor is likely to use. You can also ask the instructor about the format of upcoming tests. Although most instructors will not tell you the exact questions on the test, they will often give you information about the types of questions and the general topics that will be included. Some instructors also make old tests available at the Reserve Desk at the Library. Students who have taken the course before can also be valuable resources. The more detective work you can do about the tests you will have to write, the more efficient you can make your reading.

By thinking about your purpose in doing the reading, you can narrow down the focus of your reading and thereby limit what you spend time on.

*Task: Consider your purpose in reading the textbook you've chosen to use for this activity. What kinds of tests will you need to write? How should that affect what you need to get out of your text? If you don't know anything about the tests, plan a strategy for finding out.*

## 2. Pre-read

Now spend about 5 minutes looking over the chapter. As you look at the items below, consider:

- What you already know about the topics being discussed. This provides hooks for your memory. It is by connecting new ideas to old ones that you can remember the new information. Your prior knowledge might be academic or it might be from life experience.
- The organization of the material; get a sense of how the reading will progress. Knowing where you are going in reading helps you organize the information in your head. This organization aids understanding and memory.
- Your purpose in reading the text.

Here are the things you should look at in your chapter. Not all of the things on the list are in every chapter, but if they're there, take a quick look at them.

- a. Read the title of the chapter.
- b. Read the introduction. Just read the first part of it if it is long.
- c. Read the chapter objectives (either in the text or in your course pack).
- d. Read the chapter headings and sub-headings.
- e. Examine any diagrams, graphs, pictures, etc.
- f. Scan any marginal notes or boldface terms.
- g. Read the chapter summary or review of main points.
- h. Read the list of key terms.
- i. Read the chapter review questions.

*Task: Open your text to the next chapter you need to read for your course. Now, look at all the items from the previous list which are included in the chapter. As you look:*

- *consider what you already know about the topics presented*
- *notice the organization of the chapter*
- *think about what kind of test you'll need to write on the chapter*

*With your tutor, discuss what you have learned about about the chapter.*

## 3. Section

Now divide the chapter into several manageable sections using the headings and sub-headings to guide you. Sections can vary in length, but the best is probably if the sections are about 2 to 3 pages long. Go on to steps 4 and 5 with the first section. Then move on to the following sections in the same way.

*Task: Look over the first part of the chapter and identify the first couple of sections you will work on.*

## 4. Read Actively

### a) Create questions.

- Look at the headings, sub-headings, marginal notes and bold face items, and think of questions that you think will be answered in the section. For example, if a sub-heading in a Marketing text under the major heading of *Persuasion* is *Testimonials*, a student might make questions like *What is a testimonial? How does a testimonial persuade?*
- Consider the chapter objectives and/or review questions you pre-read. Do these suggest other questions about this section? Draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. Write your questions down on the left hand side.

### b) Read the section, looking for answers to the questions you identified.

- Don't get bogged down trying to understand every single thing; just focus on answering your questions. Skim stuff that does not relate to your questions.
- Use a highlighter or pencil to mark the answers to your questions or make notes on the right hand side of the paper you wrote the questions on.
- Monitor yourself for losing focus as you read. If you notice your mind has drifted away from the reading, make a mark on the top corner of your book, and get back to the reading. Using this strategy, you will find that the number of marks reduces over time.
- Take regular short breaks. Don't try to do a marathon reading session; that's not very productive. A five minute break every half hour is a good rule of thumb.
- Read sitting at a desk or table. It is much harder to focus if you are lying down or in a soft chair.

*Task: Start with the first section in your chapter. Create questions and record them on a piece of paper. Then read the section looking for answers to your questions; either highlight the answers or take notes on the answers in your own words. See the next section (Produce Study Material) for more details on highlighting and taking notes.*

## 5. Produce Study Material

If you've followed steps 1 to 4, you have already begun to produce study material. There are a number of types of study material that you can create; you need to consider which types suit your own style of learning as well as which are going to work best for the type of material you are trying to learn. Here are some options:

a. Highlight text and use marginal notes.

Highlight answers to your questions. Put notes in the margins beside the highlighted bits. These notes should be questions or

words that suggest a question. For example, if some highlighted bits suggest reasons for animal extinction, you might write *3 reasons for animal extinction* in the margin. If the term *metamorphosis* is defined, you might write *Define metamorphosis* or *What is metamorphosis?*

b. Take notes on the section.

This is similar to highlighting and using marginal notes, but it is done on separate paper and in your own words. This may seem more time consuming, but by putting the ideas in your own words, you make the ideas a lot more memorable. Some students worry that if they put the ideas in their own words, they might get it wrong, but test questions rarely use exactly the same words as the text anyway, so you need to form an understanding of the ideas, not just memorize something you don't understand. If you are worried that your notes are not accurate, you can check them with your instructor, a classmate, or a tutor.

A good way to make notes is to use a split-page system. In the split-page system, you draw a line down the middle of your page. On the left, you record questions (like the marginal notes described above). On the right, note the answers in your own words. This creates a good study tool for later.

c. Produce graphic organizers.

Graphic organizers are strategies for presenting information in a visual form. They include things like charts, timelines, graphs, process diagrams, classification trees, diagrams and mind maps. Refer to other Learning Centre handouts for ideas on how you could make graphic organizers (F-11, F-12 @ NW). For some types of material, it may best to do a number of sections of the chapter before you try to create graphic organizers.

The important benefit of graphic organizers is that they look at the big picture and they encourage you to see the relationships between the pieces of information you need to learn. This aids memory. Graphic organizers are especially useful for people who are visual learners.

## d. Produce brief written summaries.

Summaries are another way to look at the big picture. For each section that you read, write 1 to 3 sentences in your own words, summarizing the key ideas you discovered in the reading.

It is often good to produce a variety of study material. Many students find it best to **(a)** either do highlighting or notetaking **plus (b)** either make graphic organizers or summaries. Experiment and see what works for you.

*Task: Produce at least two kinds of study material on the section you have read. If the chapter continues on the same basic topic, you may not want to produce graphic organizers until you have worked on more sections of the chapter. Continue on with your reading assignment, section by section, until you have completed it. Then produce any further study material you think would be useful. Get feedback from your tutor on the study material you have produced.*

## 6. Study the Material You've Produced

How to study?.

- highlighting or notes  
Cover the information. Look at the marginal notes or questions and try to think of the answer. Then consult the highlighted text or your notes to check if you got the answer right. Answering the questions out loud helps you remember better than doing it silently.
- graphic organizers  
Look at your graphic organizers regularly. Think of questions you could be asked about the information in the organizers and answer the questions out loud.
- summaries  
Review your summaries by reading them outloud. Think of exam questions that could be asked in relation to the summaries and answer them.

When to study?

It is best to study material within 24 hours of when you produced it. This makes a big difference to how much you remember. After that, the more often you review, the better you'll remember the material. The best course of action would probably be to review all the material weekly. However, that may not be too practical in terms of the time you have available. Minimally, you should also review it a week after producing it and again prior to writing your exams.

For more information on memory strategies, ask a Learning Centre tutor for handouts on memory.

*Task: Within a day of completing the reading assignment, review the study material you produced. Plan when you will review it again.*

## Conclusion

How you use this reading strategy will depend on your preferences. Now that you have tried out the steps, you may have some ideas about what works best for you. Modify the strategy to better suit you or the kind of material you are learning.

Here are some frequently asked questions (F.A.Q.'s) that address some concerns that students often have when learning to read strategically.

## F.A.Q.'s

How can doing all this possibly save me time?

Because your reading is more focused, you get a lot more out of the time spent and you don't waste time on things that are unimportant.

What if my text doesn't have headings and sub-headings, objectives and things like that? How can I create questions?

If all else fails, try reading the first sentence of each paragraph or sub-section and focus your questions on that material.

What if I don't think of a question that is important? I might ignore important information.

When you read looking for answers to your questions, you skim the rest of the material. If you see something that looks important that your questions don't address, you can always add in a question to cover it.

By doing this, I don't learn all the material. How can I do well if I don't learn everything?

The fact is that it is impossible to learn everything in a college textbook. If you try to do that, you will be unsuccessful. An important part of the reading process is to sift out the things that are most important. You may not always get every single thing that is important, but you will remember what you do get. For most students, the chance of success is much greater with this approach than if they try to learn everything in the book.