



Advising Services

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*Academic Support
& Advising*

EFFECTIVELY READING A TEXTBOOK

Do you want to read a textbook more effectively than 99% of first year students at Harvard? Then read the summary paragraphs before doing any in-depth reading. A 2001 study by Dr. Perry of 1500 Harvard students found that when given 20 minutes to read a 30 page chapter, only 15 of them read the summary first. (Academic Skills Center, Dartmouth College 2001)

THE BASICS

Know why you're reading

You're reading the chapter before the lecture so as to increase your comprehension during the lecture. Most faculty draw their test material more from their lectures than from the texts, but you need to read the text beforehand so you have the background vocabulary and concepts to absorb the lecture material.

Stay alert

Ask yourself what you want to get out of a reading assignment, then look around for those points. As soon as you slip into numbly scanning pages, you're done for. You've got to ask questions and interact with the material if you want to own it.

Take vocabulary seriously

In many subjects, the main objective of assigned reading is for you to get a handle on new vocabulary. Time spent looking up definitions is well spent.

THE TECHNIQUE

There are some great structured textbook reading systems you can research on the internet, but you'll need to develop your own. No matter what reading pattern you develop, it needs to include the following:

PREVIEW

Whatever you do, don't start by reading. Your first task is to get a sense of the big picture of what the chapter is covering. Start by scanning:

- The chapter title: what are you going to be learning about?
- Section titles: what is the progression of topics?
- Info in margins: how does it relate to the section title?
- Graphics, charts: what big concepts can you pull from them?
- Highlighted vocabulary: what terms are new to you?
- Summary sections: Each sentence will hold a key concept. What are they?
- Review questions: what are you expected to know once you've read?

Resist the urge to read paragraphs. At this point, your task is to know the big picture, and you want to do it in 10 minutes or less.

READ

Break down the chapter into chunks you can read in 10 minute segments. The most recommended approach is to ask yourself questions about the material and then read for the answers. Another approach is to read through a paragraph, ask yourself, "What was the main point of this?" and highlight that phrase or write summaries in the margins. If you're a note-taker by nature, copy the section title into your notes, read and pause at the end of each paragraph to write a summary sentence in your own words. Relate the main point of each paragraph back to section titles. Look up vocabulary words in the glossary and make study cards. Consciously think about how new concepts are connected to concepts you already know.

REPHRASE

Here is one of the best techniques out there: after actively reading each chunk of a chapter, put the book down and pretend you're the professor. Lecture an imaginary class (yes, out loud!) on the main points of what you just read rephrased in your own words. If you forget something, glance back and repeat that section of your lecture. For this to work, you need to be somewhere you can talk out loud, and you need to actually lecture. If you're more of a visual than a verbal learner, write, draw, or illustrate the main point of what you just read rather than lecturing.

REVIEW

You're back to scanning. Look back over the chapter and section titles and make sure you know how all the material is related. Reread the summary, making sure you remember all the main points. Answer any review questions in the text, or even better, write and answer your own. If you haven't highlighted yet, this is a great time to highlight main points now that you've got a handle on the whole topic. Start your next reading session by reviewing this chapter again before moving on to the next.