Guide to Reading Textbooks

STUDENT'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE STUDY #4

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Most freshmen are surprised to find that the reading assignments for their college courses are much more difficult than they had expected. Both the amount of assigned reading and the difficulty level of their textbooks greatly exceed anything that they have previously experienced. If you, like many other students, find your textbooks to be dull as well as difficult reading, please remember that the author of a textbook is not writing to entertain you. Instead, he is trying to provide you with a body of information and ideas presented in a scholarly manner. It is written as serious material and you must dig and sweat to master the facts and concepts contained therein. Furthermore, you must generate your own interest and motivation to master the material, for you will be free to procrastinate about doing your assignments more than ever before.

Another important difference between college and high school textbook reading is that in college, you will buy your own books and can mark in them all you want. However, this could also become a problem. Textbook marking can be a useful aid to study and review, but it must be done with thought and care. Otherwise, it can become mere busy-work and may give you a false sense of accomplishment when, in fact, you have not really mastered what you were reading at all. Then, too, if you overdo the underlining, you defeat the purpose of quick identification of important points when you return later to review the material for an examination.

Reading efficiency experts have devised a simple five-step system that promotes more meaningful reading, makes it easier to prepare for exams, and results in appreciably higher course grades. The system is called the SQ3R Reading Method. Although this technique will require about 10-15 percent more time while you are reading an assignment, it will greatly reduce the time required for reviewing before quizzes, and you will also get much more out of such reviewing. The five-step SQ3R Reading Method is described in detail on the next page.

Using the SQ3R Reading Method will help you in four ways. First, it will help you to learn the information that you will be responsible for in your courses. Second, it will help you to combat the tendency to forget what you have learned. Third, it will help you to increase your ability to concentrate on what you are studying. Finally, it will
help you to organize materials into a meaningful pattern of main points and supporting details. In short, it will help you to get the most out of your textbook reading.

One additional principle must be mastered, however, if you are to really get the maximum from your textbook reading. The principle of timely reading is basic to successful study. Timely reading means that you read your textbook assignments at the best possible time — before you go to class to hear the professor’s lectures covering the material. Doing this will assure better understanding of what the professor says and, thus, will insure that you take better notes during his lecture. Then, after your instructor has lectured on the material, you should review the accompanying reading assignment to confirm your understanding of the points emphasized in his presentation.

Analysis of the reading behavior of typical entering college freshmen reveals that most are guilty of one or more of the following deficiencies. First, they read their textbook assignments too hurriedly because they want to get it over with as soon as possible. Second, they begin reading immediately instead of making a brief, preliminary survey to familiarize themselves with the material to be covered. Third, they read their textbook assignments passively, much as they would magazine fiction, instead of getting actively involved in analyzing and evaluating the ideas being presented. Fourth, they underline too much or too little instead of following a systematic approach to underlining their textbooks. Finally, they rarely, if ever, stop to question themselves about the importance of the material they have read, or to recite to themselves the main points covered in the reading assignment.

The SQ3R Reading Method was specifically developed to help overcome these typical reading deficiencies. Furthermore, this approach will reduce your forgetting because it increases the meaningfulness of the material you are studying. Also, it provides an organized basis for your systematic reviewing prior to a test on the material. The arguments citing the advantages of the SQ3R Reading Method are very convincing. Unfortunately, however, many students abandon the system after giving it only a brief trial. Why? The reasons most often given are that the method is too complicated to learn and that the process consumes too much time. Of course, what really went wrong was that the student employed an incorrect approach in trying to master the system. Instead of introducing the various elements of the procedure gradually, the student tried to change his reading skills overnight and immediately converted to the total SQ3R Reading Method. In other words, he failed because "he bit off more than he could chew".

The best way to master the SQ3R Reading Method is to select a chapter from one of your textbooks and practice the techniques involved. The following eight-step procedure is suggested as an effective approach to employ in learning the SQ3R system.
Step #1 - “S” for SURVEY

First, SURVEY the reading assignment quickly, taking no more than five minutes to glance over a whole chapter. Check the headings and sub-headings -- they represent the author’s outline and make it easy for you to follow his organization of ideas. Inspect all graphs, maps, tables, diagrams, and pictures -- they are included because they clearly summarize, in a more visible and tangible way, many facts and relationships that would otherwise require hundreds of words. Read the introductory and summary paragraphs -- they point out the important points to look for as you read and how these concepts are related to each other. Making such a preview will orient you to what the chapter is about before you study it in detail.

Step #2 - “Q” for QUESTION

Second, arouse your curiosity about the material by asking yourself the following QUESTION: “What are the main points that the author is trying to tell me?” Then, as you read, convert headings and subheadings into who, what, where, when, why and how questions and read to find the answers to these questions. Challenging yourself to find answers to such questions will help you to maintain interest in what you are reading and will aid in evaluating the significance of what you are reading.

Step #3 - “R” for READ

Third, READ the assignment carefully for meaning. When you read, do not read passively as you would an adventure story. Such novels are for entertainment and are written without any concern for whether or not you remember details. Read actively! Underline key words and phrases to aid you in recalling the main points of the chapter. Use the asterisk, exclamation point or question mark to indicate an important definition, a key formula, or a potential test question. Summarize key ideas in your own words in the page margin of the book. Remember, such active participation in the reading process will increase your understanding of the material being read.

Step #4 - “R” for RECITE

Fourth, stop at appropriate intervals and RECITE to yourself from memory the main points of the assignment, recalling only the essential details to understand what the author is trying to say. Without looking at the book, check whether you have learned the major concepts by trying to restate them in your own words. If you cannot do this immediately after reading the material, you cannot hope to do it tomorrow in class or next week on an exam. Such self-recitation provides a way to test yourself quickly and easily to reveal what you have learned. If you cannot repeat most of the main points,
then you have not learned the material and you will simply have to re-read it again if you are to master what you are studying.

**Step #5 - "R" for REVIEW**

Finally, REVIEW the chapter at periodic intervals to refresh your memory and make the facts stick. Don’t wait until you are confronted with an examination to do your reviewing. That’s a good time for the final review, but not for the first review. Reviewing is simply the process of going over the material again in order to fix it in your memory. Re-read your marginal notes and underlining and say over again the sequence of main ideas and supporting facts until you have them once more firmly in mind. Research has clearly demonstrated that the best time to review material is shortly after you have learned it. It is most important, therefore, that you not omit this review immediately after learning. You will, of course, want to review the material again just before a test.

**Step #1:** Survey the entire chapter for overall content and organization by reciting introductory and summary paragraphs and all headings and subheadings.

**Step #2:** On the basis of your survey, break the total chapter down into major units of not more than 6-8 pages each.

**Step #3:** Skim the initial unit of the chapter to familiarize yourself with the content coverage and organization of the unit.

**Step #4:** While skimming, arouse your curiosity about the material by turning headings and subheadings into questions about the information to be presented.

**Step #5:** Read the initial unit of the chapter actively, underlining and marking as appropriate to identify the major points.

**Step #6:** After reading the initial unit, close your book and confirm your mastery of the material by reciting the major concepts to yourself in your own words.

**Step #7:** Repeat this skimming-questioning-reading-reciting process for each subsequent unit of the chapter.

**Step #8:** After all units have been read, quickly review the total chapter once again to help tie the material together and fix the concepts in your mind.

You will find that this eight-step approach will help you to quickly master the SQ3R Reading method. Practice using it on several chapters, gradually increasing the length of your reading units until you are able to apply the SQ3R system to the total chapter
without breaking it up. You may also find that you want to emphasize certain elements of the procedure, such as surveying, and to modify your use of other elements such as questioning, because these changes work better for you or are more appropriate to a specific course. Go ahead! The important thing is for you to learn the system. You can then adapt it to meet your specific needs.

Two additional suggestions are in order if you truly want to be a good reader of textbook material. First, be a flexible reader and adjust your reading approach to fit your needs. If a body of material is especially difficult, you may need to re-read it several times before you understand it. On the other hand, you may be able to move very quickly through material that is easy or familiar. Self-recitation is of special significance here, for it is your one sure way of checking on your mastery of the material. If you can easily recall the major concepts, move on to new material confident that you do understand what you have just read. If, on the other hand, you find yourself confused and uncertain about the main points it is a definite indication that the material requires further study. Self-recitation thus gives you an opportunity to immediately check your understanding of something you have just read. And, needless to say, to be able to remember something you almost certainly must first understand it.

The second suggestion is that you be a questioning reader and critically evaluate the author’s purpose. What is he or she trying to say? What is he or she trying to get you to think or to do? Is he or she presenting facts or giving opinions? When added to the SQ3R Reading Method, a flexible and critical approach to your reading assignments will assure your being an effective reader as well as an efficient one.

The SQ3R Method

The designation of the SQ3R method is in itself a mnemonic device to help the student remember the various aspects of the method in the correct order (Robinson, 1961). The method consists of five stages: survey, question, read, recite, and review. This method takes into account such important variables as motivation, repetition, knowledge of results, recitation, whole versus part, and logic versus rote.

During the survey phase, you should look over the main headings of a unit of study to gain an overview of the material and note the major points to be developed. This survey should take just long enough for you to see the main topics around which the material is organized. If there is a summary, it is worthwhile to read it, because it may also reveal something about the organization of the chapter.

Your actual work begins with the question stage. You should rephrase the first heading into the form of a question. For example, the first heading in this chapter is “Factors
within the Individual”. You should have asked yourself, “What are the factors within the individual that will influence the efficiency of learning and remembering?” By questioning yourself in this way, your curiosity will be aroused, you will be able to bring your own previous knowledge into the picture, and you will be more likely to recognize the important points.

Now read the material in that section with a view toward answering the question you previously raised. This stage should involve an active search for the answer rather than a passive plodding through the written material.

Once you have read the section, put the book aside and attempt to recite in your own words the main points of what you have just read. This recitation can be either oral or written. If you cannot do this, you should re-read the section until you are successful at reciting the important ideas. However, you should aim at brevity, that is, do not try to memorize the entire section. The recitation phase is probably the most significant aspect of the SQ3R method since it is this behavior that is commonly required in class and on examinations.

After you have repeated this procedure for each headed section, you should review the entire lesson by looking over whatever notes you have taken. Reviewing serves as a check on memory and also pinpoints areas for further study.

Many students are probably aware of the fact that their study techniques are inefficient and could stand improvement. The SQ3R method provides a technique which, if implemented conscientiously, will almost certainly improve your performance. It will, in effect, make you your own instructor. At first, this method may seem to take more time and effort than your previous method did. But, remember that the SQ3R method itself has to be learned and this learning requires time and effort. With practice, you should be able to use the SQ3R method as easily as any well-learned and thoroughly practiced skill.

**Programmed Instruction**

Think for a moment about the traditional tools of classroom instruction: the teacher and the textbook. To what extent is either of these geared to take advantage of what we know about learning? In the typical classroom situation, the student is generally a passive recipient of information rather than an active participant in the learning experience. The instructor has little or no control over factors that are vital for effective learning. He or she has no way of ensuring that the student is paying attention, nor can he or she provide reinforcements when the student has grasped a principle or concept. In general, the typical classroom situation provides little or no reinforcement that is contingent upon the student’s responses. With the usual testing situation, reinforcement or feedback is so delayed that it probably has little or no effect on
learning. Moreover, the instructor must pace his or her lecture for the “average” student, thereby boring the brighter student and leaving the slower one behind.

In recent years, efforts have been made to overcome the difficulties inherent in the traditional classroom setting. One of the most important developments has been the emergence of programmed instruction, which systematically applies the principles of operant conditioning to the learning situation.

Several key features characterize programmed instruction. The information is presented in finely graded series of small steps. At each step, the student is required to provide answer to specific questions.

Similarly, the SQ3R method, with its system of creating questions as you read, encourages active reading, with the expected end result being a greater capacity for retaining and more completely understanding the information that is being read.