Reading Strategies for College Textbooks

Reading a college textbook is different than reading a novel from cover-to-cover, word-for-word; rather, a textbook should be read with active engagement while you make decisions about the information you are reading and how it relates to what you are learning. Here are some tips for getting the most out of your reading.

Getting ready to read

1. First, think about your reading environment. You should be comfortable but alert and engaged. Make sure the environment you choose to read in keeps you alert and engaged. Studies have found that listening to instrumental music can have an impact on memory while reading, yet some people are distracted by any kind of noise. Find the environment that works for you, but make sure it keeps you alert and focused on the task at hand.
2. Think about the time you are spending on your reading. If you find your mind wandering, take a brief break and then come back to your reading with focus.
3. Break reading into chunks and actively read each section before moving on to the next.
   a. Active reading involves engaging with your text: annotating, reading aloud, and the SQR3 method are examples of active, engaged reading. (See information below)
   b. Create a “mental file” before you read the section; have an idea of where the information you read is going to be stored in your memory and why you are storing it there. For example, let’s say you are learning about cells in biology; your memory might create a “filing cabinet” for everything you are learning about biology, then a large “folder” for the information you learn about cells, and then a “file” for cell anatomy, cell reproduction, cell classification, etc.

Reading Strategies

1. Annotation
   a. More than just underlining or highlighting key words, annotating is like having an active conversation with the text; pose questions about what you are reading, record reactions to information or the author’s ideas, note when you agree or disagree with the author and why, define terms and words you don’t understand
   b. Create a method that works for you and use it every time you read; some people like writing right in the margins of the text, while others like to use sticky notes or keep a log on lined paper; use symbols and visual reminders when appropriate
   c. Use two different colors of highlighters while reading, one color to highlight the information that you know and another color to highlight what you are unsure of or want to ask questions about
   d. Review your annotations frequently and revise as your learning and understanding changes and grows
2. SQR3 method
   a. **Survey**- before you start reading, survey the chapter or section you will read to get an idea of what you think you are going to learn; using the headings and subheadings, create an outline for your notes; preview any summaries at the end of sections or the chapter summary to get idea of what you are going to learn from the chapter
   b. **Question**- jot down a few questions that you have about concepts, vocabulary, and overall ideas that you encountered during surveying the chapter; look at these questions often during your reading to see if you are finding answers, if you are asking the right questions, if new questions arise, etc.
   c. **Read**- take notes as you read by filling in the outline created during survey and comparing information from the text to information from lectures and class.
   d. **Recite**- Read a small section, then briefly close the book and write down key concepts you remember, either in a summary or outline. This is high level cognitive thinking which will increase your understanding by forcing you to put ideas into your own words, while also showing you were there are gaps in your understanding
   e. **Review**- when you complete a chapter, review your notes; write a complete summary of the entire chapter and the main ideas; review these notes, and the reading, as necessary