Reading Strategies

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Reading your textbook is one of the most important things you’ll do as a student. In this audio presentation, we’ll explore the most efficient ways to approach reading materials, particularly textbooks.

Reading a textbook can be a daunting task. The way you approach it is key. If you were to pick up a novel, where would you begin? Would you read the first chapter and then skip to the end? Probably not. With textbooks, the usual approach to reading is not as effective. Starting on the first page and going from there will not get you the best results.

In order to read your textbook chapter most efficiently, we’ll need to explore its anatomy. You can think of a textbook chapter as an essay. What parts does an essay have? It has an introduction, body, and conclusion. What does an introduction do? It lays out the most important points in the essay. What does the conclusion do? It reviews those key points at the end of the chapter. So, when you start a chapter, read the introduction first. Read it several times, even. Then, flip to the end of the chapter and carefully read the conclusion. Now, you still need to read the material in between, but you will have a good idea of the most important themes in the chapter. Next, flip through the chapter. Does the chapter have subheadings? If so, what are they? Are there pictures, charts, or graphs? If so, look at them carefully. How about emboldened vocabulary words? If your instructor posts lecture notes or class outlines ahead of time, take a look at them first so you have an idea of what will be covered in class. All of these together give you hints about what is important.

Now you’re ready to read. Do you remember the parts of an essay? Each sub-section of the textbook is like a mini-essay as well. When you start a new section, read the first and last paragraphs carefully. Then, go through and skim the paragraphs in between for supporting details.

As you read, you should be taking notes on a separate sheet of paper. The principles for taking notes on your textbook are similar to those for class notes. Please view and listen to the lecture on note-taking in this learning unit for more tips on this. In addition, you may want to make notes in the book itself. Using pencil is a good idea if you want to sell back your textbook after the term ends. Make notes in the margins. Underline key ideas. If you want to use a highlighter, use it sparingly and only after you’ve read the whole paragraph or even section. Lisa Fraser cautions against highlighting more than 15-20% of the text. In making these notes, you will be able to review the key points from the textbook as you study.

After listening to this presentation, I hope you’ve gained some new tools for reading your text. It may seem like more work at first, but once you get the hang of it, these techniques will help you get more out of your textbook in less time!