



Using Strategies to Read College Textbooks

As a student transitioning into college life and taking courses on increasingly specialized topics, you will have to read longer and more complex textbooks. These resources can be overwhelming, but the satisfaction of understanding a new concept is well worth it. Several strategies can help you stay focused:

First Things First...

Always read assigned chapters before class. Regardless of whether you understand the material after your first review of the textbook, reading the chapters before class will give you a better comprehension of what teachers will cover and what you can expect for your upcoming assignments.

Spoil the Ending

Textbooks are not like novels or other media where reading ahead may hurt the experience. **In fact, it's better to look ahead and skim the chapter before reading.** The headings, pictures, sidebars, and concluding summaries will clarify the most important concepts of each section. Reading the end of chapter questions and chapter summary can help you target key points and important information to remember prior to tackling the chapter content.

Engage the text

Be an active reader who takes notes and looks up unknown words. Identify the central ideas of the passages you read, and then pick out supporting details. Annotate the textbook if it helps: This can include highlighting, underlining, or circling key terms and concepts along with writing brief summaries of central ideas while reading. Bring all notes with you to class when the chapter will be discussed. Effective notetaking at this stage will also streamline the study process for the final exam.

Pace Yourself

It's extremely difficult to study an entire chapter without losing focus. Some subjects like math could even take 30 minutes or more to absorb a few pages. Read a section, take notes on the material, and then move on. **Take a break every few sections to recharge your mind.**

Subject-Specific Tips

Math: Read carefully to make sure you understand the core concepts before working on a problem. Work through sample problems with the book open, and then attempt the work again with the book closed. Remember that all questions should be solvable using techniques from current or previous chapters.

Sciences: Draw or outline specific processes from the textbook. Keep a running list of key definitions and regularly review them to build your memory. Identify a mentor in your chosen field to discuss practical applications of the material you have covered.

History & Humanities: Keep track of concurrent events and trends. For example, the 1960s anti-war and civil rights movements ran parallel to the counterculture movement as it challenged traditional norms through art and lifestyle changes. Create a chart of major figures and events with key supporting details.

Additional Reading:

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Reading Textbooks Effectively
<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/reading-textbooks-effectively/>

Michigan State University: Reading a Textbook Effectively
<https://natsci.msu.edu/students/current-students/student-success-resources/academic-success/habits-to-develop-outside-of-class/study-strategies/reading-a-textbook-effectively/>

Macalester College: How to Read a Math or Science Textbook
<https://www.macalester.edu/max/wp-content/uploads/sites/120/2013/10/HowtoRead.pdf>