

How to Read a College Textbook

Your textbooks are an important tool in college learning. You may not have cracked many textbooks in high school, but if you want to succeed in college, you need to become acquainted with your textbooks and learn how to use them! You paid a lot of money for them – don't let that go to waste.

Your textbooks can:

- help you to be prepared for lecture so you won't feel overwhelmed by so many new ideas.
- help you find answers to questions you had during class.
- provide pictures, diagrams, and illustrations that make learning more interesting.
- give practice questions and problems that can help you know what to study.
- let you review at your own pace, unlike lecture where you can't ask the teacher to stop so that you can think about something.

There's no doubt about it, reading a textbook is hard work. There is a lot of information packed into every paragraph, and the sentence structure is often complex. But with a few tips, you can conquer this challenge and have a real advantage in your classes. With practice, you will find yourself reading more quickly, and remembering and understanding more of what you read. The following tips can help you get better at reading textbooks:

Start with a positive attitude. If you are dreading sitting down with a textbook, take a deep breath and say to yourself, “I can do this.”

Choose a good environment. Give yourself the best chance for success by choosing a good time and place to read. Find a location that is comfortable, but not so comfortable that it makes you sleepy – a comfortable upright chair in front of a table or desk is usually best – the library may be a good place. Try to avoid reading where there is too much noise or too many distractions. If total quiet bothers you, try some soft music, preferably without lyrics (otherwise, you'll find your brain singing along instead of paying attention to the words you are reading). Also, try to choose a good time of day for reading – not too early in the morning or too late at night.

Don't put it off. Trying to read the whole chapter the night before a test is a recipe for a bad reading experience. It is better to read a few pages one day, a few pages the next, using your syllabus to keep current with the course.

Review your notes first. If you plan to read about something that has already been discussed in class, review the material in your notes before you begin reading. Having the concepts fresh in your mind will make understanding the reading much easier. You can also pinpoint things in your notes that you need extra help understanding, and focus on those in your reading.

Skim ahead. Before you dive into the text, do a quick preview of what you're going to read. If you get the big picture first, it will help you to make sense of the details. Look for headings, words in bold print, notes at the side, and summaries which can help make sense of the text.

Do it in chunks. Read one paragraph or section at a time, using the headings or paragraph breaks to break the reading up into manageable chunks. Look for the main idea and supporting ideas in each paragraph. Try to figure out what each sentence is saying before going on to the next.

Take notes. As you read, write some notes on a separate piece of paper, outlining the main ideas of the text. Putting it in your own words will help you understand and remember. This will force you to process the information so that you can summarize the main ideas. It will also be helpful as you look back at your notes to see the big picture of what you're reading about.

Look up words. If you come across words you don't know, look them up. If they are words that have to do with the subject matter, try the glossary at the back of the textbook. If they are regular English

words, use a dictionary. Don't waste time guessing what something means when it would only take 30 seconds to know for sure.

Pause to review. After each paragraph or section, stop and review. Say to yourself, now, what did I just read? Explain the main idea out loud, in your head, or on paper. Reread if you need to to make sure you've got it.

Mark main ideas. Underline or highlight key points. Be sparing – if you highlight nearly every sentence, it won't help much! Force yourself to wait until you finish the section to go back and mark what's really important.

Create questions and look for answers. One commonly used method is to turn the headings into a questions before you read, and write these on cards or a piece of paper. If the heading says “The Ideal Gas Law,” you could write “What is the ideal gas law?” Then as you read, look for the answers to these questions and write them down on the other side. These questions and answers will be a great help when it comes time to study for the test!

Turn statements into questions and answers. Another way to do this is to create questions as you are reading by turning statements into questions, then writing the answer on the other side of the page or card. If you read “Many yellow or orange fruits and vegetables such as apricots, cantalope, pumkin, and peaches are good sources of vitamin A,” you could write, “How can you recognize foods that may be a good sources of vitamin A?” Then on the other side of the card write, “yellow or orange colored fruits and vegetables.”

Get your ears involved. Find a secluded spot and try reading out loud – this can help keep your mind focused, and brings the part of your brain in charge of interpreting speech into the effort. Try reading into a tape recorder and listening to the tape.

Two heads are better than one. You can also try reading the chapter out loud with another student and discussing what it means together. This can be a great activity for a study group. Quiz each other on what you have read. If you don't have a partner available, try explaining what you have learned to a friend or family member who is willing to listen. Teaching and explaining is a powerful way to learn!

Use practice problems. If there are comprehension questions or practice problems, do them on scratch paper (even if they weren't assigned!). You can also look ahead at these questions before you read and look for the answers while you read. Looking for answers to questions makes reading much easier.

Work on reading faster. It takes time to read well, but if you find yourself reading so slowly that you aren't able to get through the pages that you need to, work on speeding up. Try to avoid mouthing the words or following along with your finger – read groups of words together rather than each one separately. Concentrate on trying to read as fast as you can and still understand what you are reading – just trying to read faster can train your brain to do so. If you need to, look on the internet, find a book, or take a class on improving your reading skills.

Take breaks. Your brain can only focus well on something for about 20 minutes. After that, it becomes difficult to concentrate and be productive. So don't try to read from more than 20 minutes without a 3-5 minute break. Get up and walk around, get a drink, take out the garbage, do some dishes, play with your kids, run around the building, whatever. Then come back and go at it again.

Get rid of distracting thoughts. If you are having a hard time concentrating because you keep thinking about other things, take out a blank sheet of paper and free write for 5 or 10 minutes about whatever you are thinking about. This can have the effect of emptying your brain onto the page, and helps get worries or basketball games or TV shows or whatever off your mind so that you can concentrate. If you are worried about what you need to get done, make a list of everything you need to do and prioritize it. Having a plan can help you focus on one thing at a time.