HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR TEXTBOOK

Textbooks, though often criticized and seldom praised, are essential to your college career. They provide core information in readily accessible form. After a careful and thorough investigation, most instructors assign a textbook for their courses. Instructors select textbooks they feel will best complement, amplify, expand, and enrich the classroom presentation.

It is estimated that at least two hours of independent study are required in college for every one hour of class instruction, with the bulk of this outside work concentrated on the assigned textbooks. Therefore, it is important that you know the make-up of your text and what clues to look for so that you understand the author's meaning.

The SQ4R Method will help you keep your studying organized and efficient. The steps to SQ4R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Record, Review) are explained in the steps below.

SURVEY

Glance over the material to get a feel for what you will be reading.

Survey the entire textbook

When you first receive your textbook, spend about 20 minutes skimming the entire textbook to acquire an overall understanding of how the book is organized.

- Look at the title page.
- Look at the copyright page.
- Look at the table of contents.
- Read the preface.
- Look at the ancillary material (appendix, glossary, bibliography, and index)
- Look at any illustrations (including charts, graphs, and tables)

Survey each chapter

Survey a chapter assignment before you actually read it. Your survey should tell you the scope of the content, how different topics are organized, and what the author's purpose and point of view are. The chapter survey will also give you sufficient background information for your class notes.

- Note the chapter title.
- Note the chapter objectives.
- Read the chapter summary or review.
- Read the major headings and subheadings.
- Note the visual aids.
- Note the italicized and/or underlined words and terms.

Survey the illustrations

Our society is visually oriented; authors and publishers are well aware that effective use of illustrations in textbooks is more necessary than ever. Illustrations can literally replace hundreds of words and convey a message more dramatically and quickly than a comparable section of text. Formats range from equations, theorems, and formulas to tables and graphic illustrations.
QUESTION

Ask questions before, during, and after reading the material

As you survey the material, ask yourself questions about what you'll be reading and what you will try to answer. Turn the headings and subheadings into questions. These questions give you a real reason for reading and will help you concentrate on the subject you are reading.

Imagine, as you read your textbook, that the author is speaking directly to you. Question the author's statements. Challenge the ideas presented. Textbooks are not the "final word," but are a means of actively involving you, the reader, in the learning process. Do not passively accept the author's presentation of material; look at it critically and read with a questioning and searching attitude. Ask the standard questions: what, why, and how.

READ

Read for the main ideas and organization

Now you should read actively with these certain questions in mind and attempt to answer the questions and organize the material. These answers will be the important facts and details. Read everything in a chapter including any of the visual aids such as picture captions, graphs, charts, etc. Note any words or phrases that are italicized, underlined, or in bold print (there's a reason this material is highlighted!) The tendency in reading is to keep going, but you should stop at the end of each section to see if you can answer the questions you asked at the start of the section.

Find the main ideas in each chapter or section. Textbook authors write as you have been taught to write: they develop a topic sentence and/or paragraph, substantiate it, and draw conclusions.

Concentrate on what you are reading. Try to feel the rhythm of the author's prose (short, snappy sentences or long, labored explanations) and then "go with the flow." Note particularly the headings and subheadings; they indicate the relative importance of each topic.

Study the illustrations. These serve as "pegs" to help you remember the major points being discussed in the text.

RECITE

Summarize aloud what you have read

Recite the main ideas, in your own words, aloud or to yourself, after finishing a page. Check your comprehension and make sure you have the correct information. Do the same for the major points after reading each section or chapter.

By reciting what you've read, you are able to see how much information you absorbed, areas you didn't understand and need to review, and answers to the questions you generated for yourself. If you cannot answer your questions, go back to the material and reread.

RECORD

Marking your textbook increases your understanding of the material for the present and for future reference. The process of selecting and marking requires you to find the main ideas. Later, when you review the text for exam purposes, you will find that your textbook markings and
highlights enable you to grasp the essential points without having to read entire paragraphs and chapters again.

Write down the central points for the chapter or section in your notebook. Do each assignment before class. This will prepare you to participate in class discussions which will, in turn, help you remember the material you have read and to put it into perspective.

**Underline and make marginal notes**

*Underlining* key words and sentences will make those items stand out in your mind.

*Marginal notes* give you the opportunity to question a statement or position taken by the author as well as making you select the key words or items you want to remember from the paragraph.

*Summaries* enable you to write a brief summation of a section in your own words.

**Develop your own system.** Use whatever facilitates your retention of the material and works best for you. You might use the following: a double underline for main ideas and a single underline for supporting points; a bracket to enclose several consecutive lines that are important, rather than underlining all of them; or a box or circle around key terms.

**Read before you mark.** Read a few paragraphs or sections and then go back over the material and underline those topics and/or words that you feel are important.

**Be selective.** Underline only those points that are clearly essential. You will then have a visible outline of the major points on a page.

**Use your own words.** Your marginal notations and summaries should be in your own language so you can readily recall the original material as you review. Using your textbook in this manner enables you to extract all that the book has to *offer* you in a learning situation, now and in the future. You will be able to use your texts for review in later courses in the same field or in an allied field, thus reducing the need to re-read the material. You will reap the most benefit from reviewing your own notes in your own text, rather than being distracted by notes you may find written by some other person in a used text.

**Coordinate your class notes and textbook notes**

**Read** the textbook material on time and prior to the corresponding class or lecture if at all possible. You can then follow the instructor's thought more easily, separate important points from lesser details, and have your class notes become more meaningful to you.

**Develop** your own note-taking technique for each class. Many students use only one side of the paper for class notes, leaving a 2- or 3-inch margin on the left side of the page for writing key words and labeling.

**Combine** your text notes and class notes. Do this by writing your class notes on the right hand page of your notebook and transferring your text notes to the appropriate left hand facing page. You can then easily review all the information gained from your class and your text reading.
REVIEW

Review constantly

Reviewing is an essential part of retention. Review your textbook notes shortly after you have written them and continue to review them periodically.

Spend a few minutes going over your earlier notes before beginning a new reading assignment. This will help you keep the overall picture of the author's development in mind and will let you place the new material properly within that arrangement.

Review any and all supplements to your text. These usually contain quizzes and self-tests on material in your text which will prepare you better for examinations. Constantly review throughout the course will greatly reduce the time you will need to spend preparing for exams and will make that time less stressful ("cramming") and more relaxing ("reviewing").