

5.2 How Do You Read to Learn?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the four steps of active learning.
2. Develop strategies to help you read effectively and quickly.

The four steps of active reading are almost identical to the four phases of the learning cycle—and that is no coincidence! Active reading is learning through reading the written word, so the learning cycle naturally applies. Active reading involves these steps:

1. Preparing
2. Reading
3. Capturing the key ideas
4. Reviewing

Let's take a look at how to use each step when reading.

Preparing to Read

Start by thinking about why your instructor has chosen this text. Has the instructor said anything about the book or the author? Look at the table of contents; how does it compare with the course syllabus? What can you learn about the author from the **front matter** of the book (see [Table 5.1 "Anatomy of a Textbook"](#))? Understanding this background will give you the context of the book and help define what is most important in the text. Doing this exercise once per textbook will give you a great deal of insight throughout the course.

Now it is time to develop a plan of attack for your assignment. Your first step in any reading assignment is to understand the context of what you are about to read. Think of your reading assignment in relation to the large themes or goals the instructor has spelled out for the class. Remember that you are not merely reading—you are reading for a purpose. What parts of a reading assignment should you pay special attention to, and what parts can you browse through? As we mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, you will be expected to do a considerable amount of reading in college, and you will not get through it all by reading each and every word with a high level of focus and mental intensity. This is why it is so important to learn to define where to invest your efforts.

Open your text to the assigned pages. What is the chapter title? Is the chapter divided into sections? What are the section titles? Which sections are longer? Are there any illustrations? What are they about? Illustrations in books cost money, so chances are the author and publisher thought these topics were particularly important, or they would not have been included. How about tables? What kinds of information do they show? Are there bold or italicized words? Are these terms you are familiar with, or are they new to you? Are you getting a sense for what is important in the chapter? Use the critical thinking skills discussed in [Chapter 3 "Thinking about Thought"](#) as you think about your observations. Why did the author choose to cover certain ideas and to highlight specific ideas with graphics or boldface fonts? What do they tell you about what will be most

important for you in your course? What do you think your instructor wants you to get out of the assignment? Why?

Anatomy of a Textbook

Good textbooks are designed to help you learn, not just to present information. They differ from other types of academic publications intended to present research findings, advance new ideas, or deeply examine a specific subject. Textbooks have many features worth exploring because they can help you understand your reading better and learn more effectively. In your textbooks, look for the elements listed in the table below.

Table 5.1 Anatomy of a Textbook

Textbook Feature	What It Is	Why You Might Find It Helpful
Preface or Introduction	A section at the beginning of a book in which the author or editor outlines its purpose and scope, acknowledges individuals who helped prepare the book, and perhaps outlines the features of the book.	You will gain perspective on the author's point of view, what the author considers important. If the preface is written with the student in mind, it will also give you guidance on how to "use" the textbook and its features.
Foreword	A section at the beginning of the book, often written by an expert in the subject matter (different from the author) endorsing the author's work and explaining why the work is significant.	A foreword will give you an idea about what makes this book different from others in the field. It may provide hints as to why your instructor selected the book for your course.
Author Profile	A short biography of the author illustrating the author's credibility in the subject matter.	This will help you understand the author's perspective and what the author considers important.
Table of Contents	A listing of all the chapters in the book and, in most cases, primary sections within chapters.	The table of contents is an outline of the entire book. It will be very helpful in establishing links among the text, the course objectives, and the syllabus.
Chapter Preview or Learning Objectives	A section at the beginning of each chapter in which the author outlines what will be covered in the chapter and what the student should expect to know or be able to do at the end of the chapter.	These sections are invaluable for determining what you should pay special attention to. Be sure to compare these outcomes with the objectives stated in the course syllabus.
Introduction	The first paragraph(s) of a chapter, which states the chapter's objectives and key themes. An introduction is also common at the beginning of primary chapter sections.	Introductions to chapters or sections are "must reads" because they give you a road map to the material you are about to read, pointing you to what is truly important in the chapter or section.
Applied Practice Elements	Exercises, activities, or drills designed to let students apply their knowledge gained from the reading. Some of these features may be presented via Web sites designed to supplement the text.	These features provide you with a great way to confirm your understanding of the material. If you have trouble with them, you should go back and reread the section. They also have the additional benefit of improving your recall of the material.
Chapter Summary	A section at the end of a chapter that confirms key ideas presented in the chapter.	It is a good idea to read this section before you read the body of the chapter. It will help you strategize about where you should invest your

		reading effort.
Review Material	A section at the end of the chapter that includes additional applied practice exercises, review questions, and suggestions for further reading.	The review questions will help you confirm your understanding of the material.
Endnotes and Bibliographies	Formal citations of sources used to prepare the text.	These will help you infer the author's biases and are also valuable if doing further research on the subject for a paper.

Now, before actually starting to read, try to give your reading more direction. Are you ever bored when reading a textbook? Students sometimes feel that about some of their textbooks. In this step, you create a purpose or quest for your reading, and this will help you become more actively engaged and less bored.

Start by checking your attitude: if you are unhappy about the reading assignment and complaining that you even have to read it, you *will* have trouble with the reading. You need to get “psyched” for the assignment. Stoke your determination by setting yourself a reasonable time to complete the assignment and schedule some short breaks for yourself. Approach the reading with a sense of curiosity and thirst for new understanding. Think of yourself more as an investigator looking for answers than a student doing a homework assignment.

Take out your notebook for the class for which you are doing the reading. Remember the Cornell method of note taking from [Chapter 4 "Listening, Taking Notes, and Remembering"](#)? You will use the same format here with a narrow column on the left and a wide column on the right. This time, with reading, approach taking notes slightly differently. In the Cornell method used for class notes, you took notes in the right column and wrote in questions and comments in the left column after class as you reviewed your notes. When using this system with reading, write your questions about the reading first in the left column (spacing them well apart so that you have plenty of room for your notes while you read in the right column). From your preliminary scanning of the pages, as described previously, you should already have questions at your fingertips.

Use your critical thinking skill of questioning what the author is saying. Turn the title of each major section of the reading into a question and write it down in your left column of your notes. For example, if the section title is “The End of the Industrial Revolution,” you might write, “What caused the Industrial Revolution to end?” If the section title is “The Chemistry of Photosynthesis,” you might write, “What chemical reactions take place to cause photosynthesis, and what are the outcomes?” Note that your questions are related to the kind of material you are hearing about in class, and they usually require not a short answer but a thoughtful, complete understanding. Ideally, you should not already know the answer to the questions you are writing! (What fun is a quest if you already know each turn and strategy? Expect to learn something new in your reading even if you are familiar with the topic already.) Finally, also in the left column, jot down any keywords that appear in boldface. You will want to discover their definitions and the significance of each as you read.

ACTIVITY: TRY IT NOW!

OK. Time to take a break from reading this book. Choose a textbook in which you have a current reading assignment. Scan the assigned pages, looking for what is

really important, and write down your questions using the Cornell method.

Now answer the following questions with a journal entry.

- Do you feel better prepared to read this assignment? How?
- Do you feel more confident?
- Do you feel less overwhelmed?
- Do you feel more focused?

Alternative Approaches for Preparing to Read

In [Chapter 4 "Listening, Taking Notes, and Remembering"](#) you may have determined that you are more comfortable with the outline or concept map methods of note taking. You can use either of these methods also to prepare for reading. With the outline method, start with the chapter title as your primary heading, then create subheadings for each section, rephrasing each section title in terms of a question.

If you are more comfortable using the concept map method, start with the chapter title as your center and create branches for each section within the chapter. Make sure you phrase each item as a question.

Now Read

Now you are ready to start reading actively. Start by taking a look at your notes; they are your road map. What is the question you would like to answer in the first section? Before you start reading, reflect about what you already know about the subject. Even if you don't know anything, this step helps put you in the right mind-set to accept new material. Now read through the entire section with the objective of understanding it. Follow these tips while reading, but do not start taking notes or highlighting text at this point:

- Look for answers to the questions you wrote.
- Pay particular attention to the first and last lines of each paragraph.
- Think about the relationships among section titles, boldface words, and graphics.
- Skim quickly over parts of the section that are not related to the key questions.

After reading the section, can you answer the section question you earlier wrote in your notes? Did you discover additional questions that you should have asked or that were not

evident from the title of the section? Write them down now on your notes page. Can you define the keywords used in the text? If you can't do either of these things, go back and reread the section.

Capture the Key Ideas

Once you can answer your questions effectively and can define the new and keywords, it is time to commit these concepts to your notes and to your memory. Start by writing the answers to your questions in your notes in the right column. Also define the keywords you found in the reading.

Now is also the time to go back and reread the section with your highlighter or pencil to call out key ideas and words and make notes in your margins. Marking up your book may go against what you were told in high school, when the school owned the books and expected to use them year after year. In college, *you* bought the book. Make it truly yours. Although some students may tell you that you can get more cash by selling a used book that is not marked up, this should *not* be a concern at this time—that's not nearly as important as understanding the reading and doing well in the class!

The purpose of marking your textbook is to make it your personal studying assistant with the key ideas called out in the text. Most readers tend to highlight too much, however, hiding key ideas in a sea of yellow lines. When it comes to highlighting, less is more. Think critically before you highlight. Your choices will have a big impact on what you study and learn for the course. Make it your objective to highlight no more than 10 percent of the text.

Use your pencil also to make annotations in the margin. Use a symbol like an exclamation mark (!) or an asterisk (*) to mark an idea that is particularly important. Use a question mark (?) to indicate something you don't understand or are unclear about. Box new words, then write a short definition in the margin. Use "TQ" (for "test question") or some other shorthand or symbol to signal key things that may appear in test or quiz questions. Write personal notes on items where you disagree with the author. Don't feel you have to use the symbols listed here; create your own if you want, but be consistent. Your notes won't help you if the first question you later have is "I wonder what I meant by that?"

If you are reading an essay from a magazine or an academic journal, remember that such articles are typically written in response to other articles. In [Chapter 4 "Listening, Taking Notes, and Remembering"](#), you learned to be on the lookout for signal words when you listen. This applies to reading, too. You'll need to be especially alert to signals like "according to" or "Jones argues," which make it clear that the ideas don't belong to the author of the piece you are reading. Be sure to note when an author is quoting someone else or summarizing another person's position. Sometimes, students in a hurry to get through a complicated article don't clearly distinguish the author's ideas from the ideas the author argues against. Other words like "yet" or "however" indicate a turn from one idea to another. Words like "critical," "significant," and "important" signal ideas you should look at closely.

After annotating, you are ready to read the next section.

Reviewing What You Read

When you have completed each of the sections for your assignment, you should review

what you have read. Start by answering these questions: “What did I learn?” and “What does it mean?” Next, write a summary of your assigned reading, in your own words, in the box at the base of your notepaper. Working from your notes, cover up the answers to your questions and answer each of your questions aloud. (Yes, out loud. Remember from [Chapter 4 "Listening, Taking Notes, and Remembering"](#) that memory is improved by using as many senses as possible?) Think about how each idea relates to material the instructor is covering in class. Think about how this new knowledge may be applied in your next class.

If the text has review questions at the end of the chapter, answer those, too. Talk to other students about the reading assignment. Merge your reading notes with your class notes and review both together. How does your reading increase your understanding of what you have covered in class and vice versa?

Strategies for Textbook Reading

The four steps to active reading provide a proven approach to effective learning from texts. Following are some strategies you can use to enhance your reading even further:

- **Pace yourself.** Figure out how much time you have to complete the assignment. Divide the assignment into smaller blocks rather than trying to read the entire assignment in one sitting. If you have a week to do the assignment, for example, divide the work into five daily blocks, not seven; that way you won't be behind if something comes up to prevent you from doing your work on a given day. If everything works out on schedule, you'll end up with an extra day for review.
- **Schedule your reading.** Set aside blocks of time, preferably at the time of the day when you are most alert, to do your reading assignments. Don't just leave them for the end of the day after completing written and other assignments.
- **Get yourself in the right space.** Choose to read in a quiet, well-lit space. Your chair should be comfortable but provide good support. Libraries were designed for reading—they should be your first option! Don't use your bed for reading textbooks; since the time you were read bedtime stories, you have probably associated reading in bed with preparation for sleeping. The combination of the cozy bed, comforting memories, and dry text is sure to invite some shut-eye!
- **Avoid distractions.** Active reading takes place in your short-term memory. Every time you move from task to task, you have to “reboot” your short-term memory and you lose the continuity of active reading. Multitasking—listening to music or texting on your cell while you read—will cause you to lose your place and force you to start over again. Every time you lose focus, you cut your effectiveness and increase the amount of time you need to complete the assignment.
- **Avoid reading fatigue.** Work for about fifty minutes, and then give yourself a break for five to ten minutes. Put down the book, walk around, get a snack, stretch, or do some deep knee bends. Short physical activity will do wonders to help you feel refreshed.
- **Read your most difficult assignments early** in your reading time, when you are freshest.
- **Make your reading interesting.** Try connecting the material you are reading with your class lectures or with other chapters. Ask yourself where you disagree with the author. Approach finding answers to your questions like an investigative reporter. Carry on a mental conversation with the author.

- Consider why the instructor has selected the particular text. Map the table of contents to the course syllabus.
- Understand how your textbook is put together and what features might help you with your reading.
- Plan your reading by scanning the reading assignment first, then create questions based on the section titles. These will help you focus and prioritize your reading.
- Use the Cornell method for planning your reading and recording key ideas.
- Don't try to highlight your text as you read the first time through. At that point, it is hard to tell what is really important.
- End your reading time by reviewing your notes.
- Pace yourself and read in a quiet space with minimal distractions.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. List the four steps to active reading. Which one do you think will take most time? Why?

2. Think of your most difficult textbook. What features can you use to help you understand the material better?

3. What things most commonly distract you when you are reading? What can you do to control these distractions?

4. List three specific places on your campus or at home that are appropriate for you to do your reading assignments. Which is best suited? What can you do to improve that reading environment?
