

General Study Skills Workshop – Supplemental Resource

A Variety of Learning Strategies

SPECIFIC READING STRATEGIES

- **Repetition:** Read over the assignment once. Switch to another task for a period of time or sleep on it. Re-read the material later or on the following day. Review the assignment periodically.
- **Remediation:** Consult supplemental resources for learning key pieces of information needed to understand the reading assignment. Possibilities include introductory textbooks, student workbooks or study guides to textbooks, lab manuals, and survey books.
- **Consult with Others:** Additional help in understanding difficult readings may be obtained from the instructor during office hours, from graduate assistants, and from professional tutors. Peer tutors or someone else in the class may also provide valuable assistance.
- **Essential Words:** Focus on key words in the text. Emphasize verbs and nouns only; ignore or cross out unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. Look for terms in bold print or italics.
- **Review and Summarize:** Review after reading each paragraph of text. Identify the main idea of each paragraph. Be sure to understand each paragraph before moving on to the next. Review at the end of each section as well as at the end of the chapter. Develop your own summary of the chapter and compare it to the summary presented in the book.
- **Make Reading More Active:** Comprehension may be improved if one uses senses other than vision while reading. Stimulate the auditory sense by reading aloud or listening to tape recordings of the text. Take notes during or after reading difficult material.
- **Make Reading Interactive:** Work with another student. Read to each other, and take turns summarizing sections or chapters of text. "Teach" each other the more difficult concepts, making liberal use of visual aids. Relate the material to personal experiences.
- **Review Questions:** Evaluate your understanding of the material by answering the review questions at the end of the chapter or in student study guides and workbooks. If questions are not available, make up your own by converting the section headings into questions.
- **Words and Definitions:** Look up the definitions of all unfamiliar words, even if they are not in bold print or italics. Compile a written list of unfamiliar words (and definitions) that appear repeatedly, or record the words and definitions on audio tapes and listen to them for review. Use a dictionary to look up non-technical words, and consult the glossary in the book for technical word definitions. Place a colored paper clip on the glossary pages for quick access.

Text Book Notetaking

There are at least four reasons for taking notes on text book material. It reinforces learning of the information. It encourages selection of the main ideas and details in order to visualize the overall organization of the text. It creates a shortened version of the text with all the essential information recorded for future exam review. It helps to improve concentration.

Five of the most important tips for textbook notetaking are listed below.

- **Finish reading before taking notes.**

You should not read the entire chapter, but should read through long paragraphs or headed sections of text before recording notes. If you wait until the end to write notes, you may forget some of the important ideas and supporting details. But by reading small sections at a time, you have enough information from which to choose the most important ideas, without losing track of the flow of ideas. The most important concepts are reinforced before the reader moves on to the next section, making learning a cumulative process.

- **Be very selective about what is recorded.**

It takes practice to learn how to select the most important ideas in a reading, but remember that the goal of notetaking is to produce a shortened version of the text. Be selective so that only the basic concepts are recorded. In order to decide what information should be noted, skim or preview the text first or see what the instructor has emphasized in the lecture.

- **Use your own words.**

Because the chances of comprehending and remembering information are greatly improved when the work is your own, take the extra time to paraphrase important material. The time spent trying to understand a passage and record the main ideas in your own words is the single most important investment of time a reader can make.

- **Work quickly and efficiently.**

Notetaking does not have to be painful or time consuming. Read, think, write, and move on. The rewards will come at test time.

- **Use organizational strategies.**

Notes should be organized according to an organizational strategy. The Cornell method is a good choice because it allows you to organize and to recall actively and quickly the main points of the text.

Staying Alert while Reading

The following tips may help students stay alert while reading assignments. Select an appropriate place to read. Eliminate all external distractions.

- Get motivated and develop an interest in the subject matter.
- Get adequate rest so you are not tempted to fall asleep. Eliminate other internal distractions.
- Try the SQ5R strategy or a similar strategy for reading.
- Work for short intervals of time and take breaks between intervals.
- Mix up your subjects or assignments to avoid boredom.
- Reward yourself for completing each reading task.

Summary Writing

One strategy for improving reading comprehension is to write summaries. Summaries function to reduce the amount of information to be remembered and to organize the information in a way that aids understanding and remembering.

Some tips for summary writing are as follows.

- **Use topic sentences.**
 - Often authors write a sentence that summarizes a whole paragraph. It is called a topic sentence or a main idea.
 - If the author gives you one, you can use it in your summary.
 - Some paragraphs do not have explicit topic sentences or main ideas. You may have to invent one for your summary.
- **Get rid of unnecessary detail.**
 - Some text information can be repeated in a passage. The same thing can be said in a number of different ways, all in the same passage.
 - Other text information can be unimportant or trivial.
 - Since summaries are meant to be short, you should delete trivia and redundancies.
- **Collapse paragraphs.**
 - Paragraphs are often related to one another.
 - Some paragraphs explain one or more other paragraphs. Other paragraphs just expand on information presented in previous paragraphs. Some are more necessary or important than others.
 - Decide which paragraphs should be kept, which can be deleted and which can be joined with others.

Five steps of summary writing are provided below.

1. Make sure you understand the text.
 - Ask yourself, 'What was this text about?' and 'What did the author say?'
 - Try to say the general theme to yourself before you begin to summarize the text.
2. Look back.
 - Reread the text to make sure you got the general theme right.
 - Also reread to make certain that you really understand what the important parts of the text are.
 - Star or mark the important parts of the text.
 - Now use the four specific rules for writing a summary.
3. Rethink.

- Reread a paragraph of the text.
 - Try to say the theme of that paragraph to yourself.
 - Is the theme a topic sentence? (Main idea?) Have you marked it?
 - Or is the topic sentence missing? If it is missing, have you written one, in the margin, for example?
4. Check and double check.
- Did you leave in any lists? Make sure you don't list things out in your summary.
 - Did you repeat yourself? Make sure you didn't.
 - Did you skip anything?
 - Is all the important information in the summary?
5. Polish the summary.
- When a lot of information is reduced from an original passage, the resulting concentrated information often sounds very unnatural. Fix this problem and create a more natural- sounding summary.
 - Adjustments may include but are not limited to: paraphrasing, insertion of connecting words like 'and' or 'because,' and the insertion of introductory or closing statements.
 - Paraphrasing is especially useful here, for two reasons: It improves your ability to remember the material and it avoids using the author's words.

CREATING INTEREST

- Make the reading task more novel by role playing or pretending to be the instructor.
- Variety - Supplement the reading assignment with other sources of information about the subject: other books, magazines, journals, newspapers, computer bulletin boards and news groups, movies, television programs, and radio shows.
- Relevance - Consider how the readings are relevant to your own life. How do they relate to past experiences?
- Personalize- Make the material personal by linking it to beliefs and matters of personal concern.
- Use the information- Actively use the information by thinking, writing, and talking about it.
- Apply the information- Make connections between the readings and the lecture material. Look for relationships between the readings and other courses or one's job.
- Work with others- Work with other students to complete and/or review reading assignments.

IMPROVING CONCENTRATION

General strategies for improving concentration are discussed in the Attention and Listening page. Most may be applied to reading tasks.

- Index Cards
 - Lack of concentration often results in regression, or forgetting what one has read. To reduce the incidence of regression, use 3 x 5 index cards (or a ruler, pencil, finger) to move line by line through the text. Or, use index cards to cover what has been read already and realize the number of times the card must be moved to remember what has been read.

- Eliminate Distractions
 - Eliminate external distractions by choosing an appropriate place to read: quiet, average temperature, comfortable but not too comfortable. Avoid tv's, radios, conversations, windows, and doors. Eliminate internal distractions by motivating oneself, creating interest in the subject, and engaging in encouraging self-talk.

- Attend to Health
 - A balanced diet and adequate rest are important in maintaining good health and being able to concentrate on reading assignments.

- Organization and Time Management
 - Avoid being distracted by other assignments by getting organized and managing time efficiently. It is easier to concentrate on reading when one is not worried about other tasks or activities. Reduce day dreaming about things you want to do by setting aside time to actually do them. Clear your mind by compiling a list of things to do after completing a reading assignment.

- Be Task Oriented
 - Understand the purpose, instructions, and expectations of the reading task before getting started in order to better stay on track.

- Use Rewards
 - Be sure to reward productivity. Set goals for completing reading assignments and then treat yourself for meeting those goals.

- Mix It Up
 - Reading for short intervals of time helps one to remain focused on the task. Read for 20-30 minutes, take a break, and read for another 20-30 minutes. Alternate between different subjects to maintain interest and concentration.

- Keep Active
 - Passive readers use only their eyes while reading. They may be less able to concentrate fully on a task than active readers who use more than one sense. Take notes while reading. Read aloud to yourself or listen to audio recordings of reading.

- 60-Second Synopsis Strategy
 - This is a group strategy designed to improve concentration and reading comprehension (Huffman, 1992-1993). Groups of 3-4 students are given a reading assignment. All members of the group do the reading and then compile

an annotation of the main points. Results are presented to the rest of the class orally.

Strategies Related to Organization

TEXT BOOK ORGANIZATION

General Organization

Most textbooks have the same general format (D. Applegate, CAL). Textbooks are divided into chapters; a list of the chapters is found in the Table of Contents at the beginning of the book. Chapters related to the same theme or general topic may be arranged into units.

Most chapters have the following components: title, introduction, headings, illustrations, and summary. All of these may be used to improve one's understanding of the material.

- The title stimulates the reader's prior knowledge of the subject and helps to generate interest.
- The introduction indicates the general purpose of the reading and hints at the main ideas to be covered.
- Because they divide the text by topic, the chapter headings delineate the main ideas of the text and may be used to organize the reader's thoughts.
- Illustrations help to clarify information by presenting it in alternate formats. They may also be used to register information in and recall information from memory.
- The summary recaps the main points and reiterates the author's conclusions.

Within each section of text demarcated by a heading, the author expands upon the major idea covered in that section. Quite often, each paragraph will present one supporting detail related to the major point of the section. Examples, statistics, quotations, dates, and other information usually comprise the descriptions.

Additional information that may be found in a textbook chapter are objectives, vocabulary lists, review questions, discussion questions, and suggested readings.

- The objectives, listed on the first page of the chapter, explain the purpose of the reading and may be used in reading preparation and in assessing one's comprehension after reading.
- Vocabulary lists, found at the end of the chapter, summarize the important terms introduced in the chapter. They may be used to evaluate one's understanding of the reading.
- Review questions at the end of the chapter test the reader on the actual content of the reading to insure comprehension.
- End-of-chapter discussion questions go one step further, encouraging the reader to link the new information with prior knowledge and experiences and to process or apply the information in new ways.

Most texts have glossaries at the end of the book. The glossary is a valuable resource for looking up the definitions of content-specific words used in the text.

Specific Organization Styles

Student comprehension of reading assignments may be enhanced by gaining familiarity with the common styles of textbook organization. Recognizing how the information is organized makes it easier to identify the major concepts of the text because the reader comes to know what to expect.

Readers should be warned that one text, like a journal article or a textbook chapter, may contain information arranged in more than one style of organization. Be prepared to switch gears within the same text. The following descriptions of specific organization styles are taken, in part, from Twining (1991, p. 117).

- Comparison-Contrast
 - Comparison-contrast texts cover two sides of or two approaches to a topic.
 - The main points of each side may be presented separately. For example, a discussion of the goals, leadership, strengths, and weaknesses of the North in the Civil War may be followed by a discussion of the these things for the South.
 - Or, both sides of each major issue may be presented one at a time. For example, a biology text may discuss the assumptions of evolutionary theory and creationism, followed by the goals of each, the basic principles of each, the strengths of each, and the weaknesses of each.
 - The comparison-contrast style may be signaled by these key words and phrases: like, similarly, in the same, analogously, in contrast, but, however, rather, and on the other hand.
- Major Points
 - Some texts or portions of text, like the introduction and summary, are arranged according to major points.
 - Key phrases indicating the major points are: the major points are, there are several reasons why, most significant is, more importantly, of special note, and the primary purpose is.
- Cause-Effect
 - The cause-effect organizational style presents some topic or phenomenon and then offers explanations for it. For example, a discussion of the big bang theory or the Great Depression may be arranged according to cause and effect.
 - Key words and phrases of this style are: because, reasons for, source of, led to, so, therefore, consequently, as a result of.
- Problem-Solution
 - Math, statistics, and accounting texts are often arranged in a problem-solution style.
 - With this form of organization, explanation of a new concept is followed by a problem and solution to illustrate it.

- Sequence - Time Order
 - Information arranged sequentially or in time order is used to represent historical order or processional order. Examples of the former include texts discussing battles of the Civil War or the Spanish conquest of the Aztec. Examples of the latter are texts describing the process of mitosis or classical conditioning.
 - This style of organization is similar to enumeration, which is discussed below.
 - Key words and phrases indicating sequential or time-ordered information are: first, second, then, following that, next, after, the first step, and finally.
- Enumeration
 - Information arranged in the enumeration style is arranged in topical order. Such text may resemble a catalog or a detailed list of main points and supporting details. A chapter covering the causes of World War I may be arranged with the enumeration style.
 - Key words and phrases indicating enumeration are: first, also, in addition, another, next, and finally.
- Examples and Illustrations
 - With this style of organization, each main point is followed by examples and illustrations related to it. For example, a text on rock types includes examples and photos of each.
 - Key words and phrases indicating examples and illustrations are: for example, for instance, to illustrate, imagine, more specifically, and a case in point is.

TEXT SKIMMING

Efficient and effective readers approach a reading task with a goal or purpose in mind. That goal or purpose will guide the reader as he/she moves through the material. One way to develop a goal or purpose for a reading assignment is to skim it before reading for details.

Skimming a chapter or short article should take no more than a few minutes. In skimming, the student reads only the first sentence of each paragraph. After skimming the text, the reader recalls everything and identifies the most important points. He/she then sets a goal for the assignment and plans how to do intensive reading of the entire document at a slower pace.

From: Muskingham College. Learning Strategy Database.

<http://www.muskingum.edu/~cal/database/>