

Reading College Texts

Preview the text

The first thing you should do when you open a new book is to preview the text. Look at the contents page and survey the topics covered in the text. Then ask yourself what you already know and what you think you will need to know about the topics that will be covered in the course. This process will give you a "big picture" of the course and will help you to start thinking about how the contents of the course will fit in with your educational goals.

Now draw a map or use Cornell notes to outline the course using information from the contents page and your syllabus. This process will help you to get a perspective on how the instructor's lesson plans match up with the textbook and to plan how you will schedule your reading.

If the text looks like it might be difficult for you to read, speak with your instructor. He or she may be able to recommend a supplemental text that will help you to understand course concepts at your own level.

If you lack knowledge about a course topic and/or feel that the course will be covering it on a level that is too difficult for you, go to the library and choose a book on that subject. Read up on the topics covered in the chapter to help fill in the gaps of your knowledge.

Check to see if there is a glossary of terms or other study aides in your textbook. Keep a dictionary close by to look up words that are unfamiliar.

Preview each chapter

Before you read the chapter in detail, skim the entire chapter. Read the introduction, then skim each page, spending approximately 5 seconds per page. Notice headings, illustrations, tables, etc. Then read the summary at the end of the chapter. This process will give you an overview of the chapter and help you to plan how you will break it down into "meaningful chunks" for the next steps of detailed reading and study.

Ask questions

Now that you have an overview of the chapter, ask yourself:

- What do I already know about the information in this chapter?
- What are the main ideas of this chapter?
- How can I turn sub-headings into study/test questions to help me focus my reading?
- What questions are found in the text that might help me?

Write down your questions.

Read for details

Now read the text, looking for the answers to your questions to help you stay focused. As you read, annotate your text, highlighting important information and writing notes in the margins that will keep you actively involved in your reading and help you to better understand what you read.

As you complete each section, develop Cornell notes with main ideas in the margin and important details (explanations, examples, and applications) on the right side of the margin.

After you finish each section or unit, summarize what you have read in your Cornell notes. Write down the answers to the questions you wrote down previously. Add questions/answers as appropriate.

Recite

Develop flash cards or mnemonic devices for important terms, concepts, and information that you know you will need to memorize. Read over text annotations and the Cornell notes you developed from your reading. Summarize the information by saying it out loud into a tape recorder or by discussing the chapter with a study group. You may also "recite" the information by writing a summary or by using visual organizers to put the information into another cognitive frame.

If you marked any sections of your text for questions to ask your professor, be sure to ask them in class.

Review

Compare your notes from your textbook reading with your class lecture notes. Continue to summarize your learning. You want to keep reducing the size of your study notes, each time you review the material. The object is to be able to "clue" yourself to remember more detailed information with a single word or phrase. This process will help to keep your memory fresh and will help you to solidify or "over-learn" the material so that it becomes part of your permanent "file" of knowledge.

Keep up with reading assignments so that you don't become overwhelmed or are tempted to cram or skip reading important assignments!