

## THE LEARNING CENTER • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### Reading Comprehension Tips

Do you ever feel overwhelmed with the amount of reading you have? Do you ever have trouble staying focused and motivated while reading? Do you sometimes have difficulty understanding and remembering what you read? If so, you're not alone. Many students struggle with these things because reading in college can be challenging, time-consuming, and lot more rigorous than high school; however, with some effective strategies, you can make your reading time meaningful, focused, and productive.

### Active reading

Research shows that you retain more when you actively engage and interact with texts, as opposed to simply reading and re-reading without a clear purpose. Many students can relate to the type of reading that involves copying down pages of notes word-for-word from the text or simply scanning over pages without really reading them or interacting at all. While these two approaches are on opposite ends of the spectrum, neither of them engages your brain in a way that elicits deep understanding and retention. Active reading engages your brain in effective strategies that force your brain to interact with the text before, during, and after reading and that help you better gauge what you are (and aren't) learning.

### Before reading

Although many students don't think about this step, engaging with a text before reading can crucially boost your understanding and retention. Below are some active reading strategies to use before you read.

#### Know your purpose

Yes, you're reading because your professor told you to do so, but there is more to it than that. What will you be asked to do with the information you gather from your reading assignment? Reading in preparation for a multiple-choice exam requires a greater attention to detail (think keywords,

definitions, dates and specific concepts and examples) than reading to prepare for discussion or to write an essay (think main points and relationships). Consider your purpose for reading and what you need to be able to understand, know, or do after reading. Keep this purpose in mind as you read.

## **Integrate prior knowledge**

You already know so much; why not help yourself out? Before previewing the text, determine what you already know about the material you are to read. Think about how the reading relates to other course topics, and ask why your professor might have assigned the text. Identify personal experiences or second-hand knowledge that relates to the topic. Make a list of things you want to know about the text or questions that you want to try to answer while reading.

## **Preview the text**

Don't jump in all at once. Give the text an initial glance, noting headings, diagrams, tables, pictures, bolded words, summaries, and key questions. Consider reading introductions and conclusions to gather main ideas. After you preview, predict what the section or chapter will be about and what the main concepts are going to be.

## **Plan to break your reading into manageable chunks**

Do you have five days to read twenty pages? Read four pages a night. Twenty pages in only one night? Read four pages and then take a fifteen-minute break to rest your mind and move your body. Taking breaks while reading improves focus, motivation, understanding, and retention. Plus, it's healthier for our bodies! Try using a [weekly calendar](#) or the [Pomodoro Technique](#) to break up and schedule your time.

## **Decide whether and how to read from a screen**

Especially if you are taking courses online or studying remotely, some of your course materials may be in a digital format, such as online journal articles or electronic textbooks. Before you read, decide if your reading is something you could and would want to print out. Sometimes it is easier to grasp

content when it is on paper. If this is not your preference or is not an option, make reading breaks an even higher priority, consider adjusting your screen, and be strategic about the time of day when you are reading in order to avoid eye strain or headaches.

## While reading

Keeping your brain active and engaged while you read decreases distractions, mind-wandering, and confusion. Try some of these strategies to keep yourself focused on the text and engaged in critical thinking about the text while you read.

### Self-monitor

The only one who can make sure you're engaged while reading is you! If you are able to think about what you will eat for dinner or what will happen next on that Netflix show you love, you are no longer paying attention! As soon as you notice your mind drifting, STOP and consider your needs. Do you need a break? Do you need a more active way to engage with the text? Do you need background noise

or movement? Do you need to hear the text aloud? What about a change of environment? Before resuming, summarize the last chunk of text you remember to make sure that you know the appropriate starting point.

## Annotate

Overusing the highlighter? Put it down and try annotation. Develop a key/system to note the following in the text: key ideas/major points, unfamiliar words/unclear information, key words and phrases, important information, and connections.

## Summarize

After reading small sections of texts (a couple of paragraphs, a page, or a chunk of text separated by a heading or subheading), summarize the main points and two or three key details in your own words. These summaries can serve as the base for your notes while reading.

## Ask hard questions

Think like a professor and ask yourself higher level, critical thinking questions, such as:

- What differences exist between \_\_\_\_\_?
- How is \_\_\_\_\_ an example of \_\_\_\_\_?
- What evidence can you present for \_\_\_\_\_?
- What are the features of \_\_\_\_\_?
- What would you predict from \_\_\_\_\_?
- What solutions would you suggest for \_\_\_\_\_?
- Do you agree that \_\_\_\_\_? Explain.
- What is the most important feature of \_\_\_\_\_?
- How is the text guiding the reader to come to certain conclusions?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What premises or prior knowledge does the text require to make its argument(s)?

## After reading

Reading a text should not end at the end of the chapter. Using effective after reading strategies can help you better understand and remember the text long-term.

### Check in with yourself

Whether you read a printed text or an online document, the most important thing to assess is how much you understood from your reading. This metacognitive skill is one of the hardest to practice because if you truly missed the mark on what you read, you might not know until you get to class—or worse, until test day.

Here are some ways to self-check your reading comprehension. Try “cross-referencing” the information you read with simpler writings on the same subject and discussing your takeaways with peers. If you and your peers vary widely in your takeaways, go back to the text to see if the presentation of evidence can account for these discrepancies. Some key questions:

- Are there multiple possible “answers” here?
- Is there a blind spot in your knowledge on the subject?
- Is the language of the text too difficult or unclear?
- Are different sources on the same topic using consistent language, or are they using different language to discuss the same or similar things?

### Show what you know

- Create an outline of the text from memory, starting with the main points and working toward details, leaving gaps when necessary to go back to the text for facts or other things you can’t remember.
- Discuss the material with a friend or classmate.
- Call a family member and teach them what you now know.
- Brain dump: write down everything you remember from the reading in 5 minutes.
- Ask yourself critical questions about the reading and answer those questions in a timed format.
- Identify the important concepts from the reading and provide examples and non-examples of each concept.
- Create a concept map from memory to illustrate your learning from the assigned reading.
- Take screenshots from digital texts as a starting point for class notes or annotations.

## Investigate further

If any information remains unclear, locate other resources related to the topic such as a trusted video source or web-based study guide. Still have questions you can't answer on your own? Make note of them to ask a professor, TA, or classmate.

## Self-test

- Create flashcards or an outline for the main concepts, terms, dates, etc. in the text.
- Use the flashcards or outline to test yourself on what you read and see how much you remember and can explain correctly.
- Cover the answers or explanations and don't look at them until after you have already answered or explained in your own words.
- Pause videos periodically and use your own knowledge to supply an answer or predict where the video is going. Then hit play to see if you are on track.

Self-testing in this way will help you synthesize and think through the information and recall it better in the future.

Need help applying or practicing active reading strategies? [Make an appointment](#) with an Academic Coach or sign up for one of the [reading workshops](#) offered at the Learning Center. Our academic coaches can help you evaluate your current reading habits, discuss effective strategies, make a plan, and stick to it.

## Works consulted

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