

Tips for Active Reading

One of the most exasperating experiences of many college students is failure to understand what they read. Many students begin their college work, in fact, with a great distrust in their own ability to read college-level assignments and to perform such tasks successfully. Clearly, the ability to master reading is an essential skill critical to the success of each student.

“Tips for Active Reading” is a set of proven strategies for mastering the content of academic reading (with a bonus at the end!) Students who practice these tips create a retrieval system of information, but more importantly, they facilitate both short-term as well as long-term memory that will serve them well throughout their college career, indeed, throughout their lives in every arena which requires a thorough mastery of reading. Here, then, are nine “Tips for Active Reading”:

1) Make use of your attention span--whatever it is!

All of us have experienced the loss of concentration on what we read and our mind beginning to drift. Most of us feel guilty when we discover that we're wandering away from the page. Nevertheless, we can use that frustration to our benefit as readers.

As you prepare to begin a reading assignment, step back and watch yourself reading the assignment. Make a mental note about where it was in your text where you caught yourself beginning to drift. Then ask yourself, "Is this where I interrupt the reading? Is this where I make the phone call, run the errand, raid the refrigerator?" Go ahead! Give in to the diversion, whatever it might be, but when you return to the reading, come back to it with a commitment to reading with attention the same length of passage before you will give yourself permission to drift again. What you will find through this conscious effort is your attention span increasing little by little.

2) Concentrate on paragraphs.

For many of us, the idea of having to master the content of a whole book is simply overwhelming. We don't even know where to begin without specific assignments or study questions. The fact is, however, that most of us can master such massive amount of information if we realize that the basic unit of written communication is not the book, not even a chapter, but a simple paragraph!

Most books are nothing more than a pile of paragraphs, each one strung together to the next and so on. If we can master the content of one, we can master the content of all of them. The problem ceases to be an "issue of the head" as much as an "issue of the heart"! The real question is, "Do I really want to do this? Do I really want to master and control this information?"

3) Read for the main idea of each paragraph.

As you read each paragraph of a chapter, pause after each and ask yourself, "What did I just read? What was this paragraph about?" Then, fill in the blank: "This paragraph is

about ____." What you place in your mental blank should be a short phrase, preferably framed in your own words.

4) Annotate the main idea in the margin beside each paragraph.

Throw away the yellow highlighter! Highlighting is no more than an exercise in passive rather than active reading. In no more than three or four words at the most, write or print the main idea beside each paragraph in ink only! In a textbook of your own, never annotate in pencil! The threat of being wrong will actually increase your confidence as a reader with every additional permanent annotation!

5) Develop a strategy for marking the text.

Create a consistent pattern of markings, underlining only certain kinds of information, bracketing other, circling only key words or concepts. The key is to be consistent so that every time you scan a page, the markings themselves will signal a kind of meaning.

6) Develop a strategy for use of margins.

Practice a systematic use of margins, entering symbols of rhetorical patterns ("df" for "definition," "ex" for "example," etc.) on the interior margins, for example; content information (main ideas) in the exterior margins; the main idea of a whole page at the top of the each page.

7) Transfer each main idea to a note card.

The key to retrieving information for class discussion and for developing both short-term and long-term memory is the isolation of each important concept to a separate format. Start at the beginning of a chapter. Write down each important marginal note on a card, entering the page number each time you come upon the same or related annotation. You will find that you will have reduced the key concepts to a set of no more than a dozen or cards for an entire book!

8) Begin your study with the cards.

Review the annotations and page numbers on the cards. Ask yourself, "To what does this note refer?" If you cannot remember the content from the annotation and its page references, then return quickly to the noted pages and scan the markings. Very rarely will you have to reread even a paragraph to remember the key concepts.

9) Study only with other active readers.

Don't be ripped off by lazy readers! Never study with anyone who hasn't read actively. You will be wasting your time and won't be helping your colleague to any significant degree.

BONUS: How to Memorize a Book!

The idea of memorizing a book may sound preposterous for most readers, but that's a matter of context or situation only, right? What if it's your father or spouse or child lying on the gurney being prepared for surgery? You hope and pray that the doctor who's going to do the job not only memorized "the book" but preferably wrote the text, no?

Very rarely would memorizing a book be very important, but in the event you must, here's the process! Here's a tip for memorizing most of the content of any book of expository--that is to say, *explanatory*--writing based upon the steps above: The key is the creation of paragraph flashcards!

- 1) Identify the topic sentence--stated or implied--in a paragraph.
- 2) Identify the primary sentence or two that answer one or more of the critical questions about the main idea in the topic sentence (who? what? where? when? why? and how?)
- 3) Reframe the topic sentence as a question form beginning with the appropriate interrogative pronoun. Type this question form on one side of the card.
- 4) On the reverse side of the card, type only the one or two sentences that answer the question.