

Improving Your Reading Skills: Get More from What You Read

A good reader does as many of the following steps as possible: identifies the main idea, thinks about what is being said, actively engages with the material, concentrates on what is being read, remembers as much as possible, takes notes of important information and questions, and applies what is being read to personal experience. The sections below will take you, step-by-step, through the process of engaging with a text and what you should be doing as you read.

1. Do **not** try to read the whole assignment in one sitting. Instead, break it down into smaller pieces. Begin by reading for 10 minutes at a time. If after 10 minutes, you can completely recall and understand what you have read, continue reading for another 10 minutes. In all likelihood, you will find that the second 10-minute block was not as productive or informative as the first. This is completely normal. If this happens to you, try the following technique. Stop reading. Take a short break that involves something completely different, like sending an e-mail. Stretch or get up and move around for a few minutes. Now, come back to your reading. Begin where you lost your focus or understanding. Read until you start to get distracted. Note the time! This is the amount of time that you can comfortably read and get the most from it. It may be 10 minutes, or 12, or 15. As you become more focused and proficient, your time will increase, but you must be patient with yourself.
2. Think about what you just read. What previous knowledge do you have about this subject? What do you want to learn about the subject? After you have read a section, what new information did you get from it?

Specific techniques can help you streamline this process.

1. Before you read with attention to detail, skim the section that you are about to tackle. Do you see anything familiar? What immediately stands out to you? What is your overall impression?
2. If the section contains a summary, read the summary first. This does two things: it preloads information, making access and recall easier, and it provides a kind of map for understanding the material. It also tells you from the beginning what the main points are, so that you know the general outline of your note structure.

Now, you are ready to read for comprehension. This involves taking notes and asking yourself questions like “How does this relate to the information that came before it in the text?” Such questions increase your understanding as well as your ability to cross-reference information from other areas.

1. Reading for comprehension entails a periodic review of information already garnered. This review should reveal any gaps in your understanding of what you have previously read. It is sometimes necessary to go back to an earlier portion of the text to find the missing information. Again, your active questioning or engagement with the material will make this second nature over time.
2. The notes that you wrote while reading the text will pair with the notes you take in class when that material is under discussion. If the lecture does not answer any lingering questions, that is the time to ask the professor, either in the next class or by e-mail. Taken together, this process is the basis for much of the knowledge and skills you will acquire in your collegiate career, regardless of length.
3. Discussion of the material as soon as possible after reading will help cement the information in your mind. Study groups are very beneficial in this way; they may also help you gain different perspectives on interpretation when there is the possibility of more than one, as is possible in some literature classes.