How to Develop Effective Reading Strategies

A notable difference between high school and university classes is the amount of reading expected from students. Falling behind is easy when readings are required for every class, but there are ways to stay on top.

General tips for getting the most out of your reading

Don't let your readings pile up. Designate a time to complete your readings before lectures, and review them before exams.

Read at your own pace. Don't speed up because you think you read too slowly. We all read differently, and we read most effectively when we pace ourselves naturally.

Ask yourself pre-reading questions. For example, "What is the topic, and what do you already know about it? Why has the instructor assigned this reading at this point in the semester?"

Take notes while you read. Summarize ideas into your own words.

Write questions in the margins, and then answer the questions in a reading journal or on a separate piece of paper. If you're reading a textbook, try changing all the titles, subtitles, sections and paragraph headings into questions. For example, the section heading "The Gas Laws of Boyle, Charles, and Avogadro" might become "What are the gas laws of Boyle, Charles, and Avogadro?"

Make outlines, flow charts, diagrams or concept maps that help you to understand ideas visually.

When you finish reading, take some time to reflect: "What have you learned from reading, and how can you apply this knowledge?" Reflection can come through a variety of activities, such as jogging, listening to music, or whatever helps you connect your education to your life.

If you are reading particularly dense texts, remember to read carefully. Reflection is particularly important for this kind of reading so that you can interpret and criticize texts.

If you come across an important passage, write it down along with its page number and why you find it striking. This is particularly useful when gathering information for essays.

If reading a textbook for a class that requires memorization and understanding of theory, try to filter out the least important information, particularly that which is covered in class.

A textbook has many parts, such as summaries, examples, figures, tip boxes and online references. The main text aims to explain concepts, and all parts work toward this goal. Read what you find necessary for you to understand and be able to articulate material in your own words.

When preparing for exams, especially when they're open-book, use tabs to mark pages with significant information. Colour-code or label tabs to remind you what that information is.

Choose the strategies that work best for you, or that best suit your purpose.

What to do when you are falling behind

Make reading enjoyable. Find a comfortable setting without distractions. For example, you might try reading in a cozy chair with a hot beverage, but without a computer.

Read in a location that will facilitate your learning. If you find it harder to focus when working independently, white noise, soft music or working in a café might help you to stay on task.

Reflect on the times of day when you tend to be most productive and focused. Create a reading schedule around those productive times. Build reading into your day.

Set reading goals and prioritize reading based on importance. If you can't get it all done, work with what you can.

Try scanning the text for important information, using your class notes and outline as a guide. When you have more time, read the text more closely.

The SQ4R reading method

SQ4R is a method for reading texts that will help you absorb the information you are studying. It is a strategy that applies your senses and allows you to actively engage by translating the text into your own words. Review SQ4R Reading Method Tip Sheet.

Skim and scan

Skimming and scanning are useful techniques, but only when applied to a text with which you are already familiar.

Skimming a text involves glancing over the material in order to get a general idea of what it means. Skimming is useful for review, especially after a careful reading of the text to digest more specific knowledge.

Scanning a text requires searching the material for specific details. Scanning is useful when you have a good grounding in the general sense of the material but need reminding of certain details.

Get Inspired, and Get Reading!

Student Learning Centre

Call: 905.721.8668 ext. 6578
Email: studentlearning@ontariotechu.ca   **Downtown Oshawa Location:** Charles Hall
Website: ontariotechu.ca/studentlearning   **North Oshawa Location:** Shawenjigewining Hall

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