

READING TEXTBOOKS

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The “Obedient Purposelessness” of College Textbook Reading:

As an experiment, the director of the Harvard Reading-Study Center, Dr. Perry, gave 1500 first year students a 30 page chapter from a history book to read, with the explanation that in about 20 minutes they would be stopped and asked to identify the important details, and to write an essay on what they had read. The class scored well on a multiple-choice test on detail, however **only 15 students out of the 1500 were able to write a short statement on what the chapter was about** in terms of its basic theme. In addition, only 15 of 1500 top first year college students had thought of reading the paragraph marked "**Summary**", or of skimming down the descriptive flags in the margin. This demonstration of "**obedient purposelessness**" is evidence of "an enormous amount of wasted effort" in the study skills of first year students.

The Truths and Falsehoods of Textbook Reading:

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|--|-------------|--------------|
| 1. It is important to read every word of a textbook | True | <u>False</u> |
| <i>Through skimming and effective use of headings, the book will tell you what is important to know. You then read what <u>you</u> need to, to build your understanding. <u>You</u> are in charge; not the book.</i> | | |
| 2. It is important to preview the entire textbook before reading it for the first time | <u>True</u> | False |
| <i>You don't build a house without a whole-house blueprint, and you don't build an Understanding of a topic without having a sense of where you're going. Context is everything.</i> | | |
| 3. Skimming the first time through as rapidly as possible is helpful. | <u>True</u> | False |
| <i>Get a flavor for the overall; scan the photos, figures, charts and topics. As with a movie trailer, You'll develop a sense for what to expect, thereby laying the foundation for learning</i> | | |
| 4. If you understand the vocabulary of a chapter you will understand the meaning. | True | <u>False</u> |
| <i>Vocabulary is but one small part of comprehension. Context for vocabulary is everything.</i> | | |
| 5. Previewing a chapter for main ideas is critical to good textbook reading | <u>True</u> | False |
| <i>Consider this as building the frame of this house. Details have nowhere to belong without it.</i> | | |
| 6. Good students read their textbook chapters multiple times. | True | <u>False</u> |
| <i>In fact, good annotating (marking up the reading) and/or separate notes (in your own words!) is far better than re-reading, which is often a waste of time and effort.</i> | | |
| 7. It is bad practice to read your textbook with your class notes open beside you. | True | <u>False</u> |
| <i>On the contrary, you <u>should</u> read with all sources, notes, and supplemental materials open beside you so that you pay attention to the overall meaning, or "story," rather than to the particulars of the text or your notes. It is all ONE. Learn it that way.</i> | | |

The basic principle: *Meaning is constructed only by the reader.*

The reader - not the book's author, nor the classroom teacher - is in charge of making meaning from text. Because of this, you, the **reader**, need to know what it is you are attempting to mentally construct. Are you developing an understanding of hypothesis testing in statistics? Are you trying to understand the characteristics of children's learning in the formal operational stage of cognitive development? Or, are you trying to understand how the rise of industrialization in the Northern states contributed to the Civil War? It is by knowing what YOU WANT to learn that helps it enter your brain and then stay in it.

Successful Readers:

- 1. Preview the reading rapidly.** They do a rapid scan of the material of the chapter so as to understand how the topic breaks down into meaningful parts. Reading slowly does not help here, nor does it increase comprehension. Previewing gathers information about a chapter's key ideas by using the:
 - Chapter objectives at the front of the chapter;
 - Headings (Tip: Turn headings into questions to be answered through the reading);
 - Periodic summaries or key points;
 - Major charts, tables, graphs, illustrations;
 - Chapter summary.
- 2. Develop questions.** The key ideas gained from previewing form the questions to be answered while going through the chapter.
- 3. Read to answer their own questions** using margin notes, symbols (stars, exclamation marks, colored underlining, etc.), separate notes, or all three (!) in a notebook. They sometimes skip around the chapter - forward, backward, using the glossary or the chapter review – whatever is needed to understand the meaning, that's where they go!
- 4. Put ideas into their own words**, and create concrete examples as they go.
- 5. Resolve any confusion as they read** by looking things up in class notes, on the internet, or with different textbooks. They do not let material they don't understand well enough to put into their own words slip by them!
- 6. Think about and even challenge their own ideas as they go:** What isn't making sense? What do they agree or disagree with? How does what they read tie in with (or contradict) other ideas they've learned or read? Is the book's language biased in any way so as to lead them to draw particular conclusions or opinions? In other words, their minds are ACTIVE while they read – challenging, asking, absorbing.
- 7. Review key ideas.** Do they now understand the overall topic? Have they constructed in their own minds an understanding of the key ideas for that topic? Did they resolve or clarify confusion as they went?
- 8. Identify key terms, theory names, lists, etc.** that will need to be committed to memory before a test. They develop initial ideas about how they will do that when test-time comes (mnemonic phrases, associations, examples, etc.).
- 9. Briefly review a chapter again before starting the next one.** Re-activate the previous information in their minds as a foundation for the new information. They review mnemonic phrases and associations, and generate more examples or new mnemonics.

SIMPLE EYE TOOLS AND TRICKS TO AID COMPREHENSION OF TEXTBOOK MATERIAL:

The easiest way to do this is to make the print easier for the eyes to track!

- If reading a digital version, increase text font size (12-14 in most fonts is comfortable).

- Try changing the font style to sans-serif (no little feet at the tops and bottoms) to see if that helps.
- Make the margins wider (no more than 10-12 words per column) so the eyes have a shorter distance to travel across a line.
- Change the background color to either sepia or some other color (often pale, but some even like white on black background!). Practice with different background colors until you find one that makes the print appear crisper and easier to read.
- If reading text on paper, and the print and/or the background cannot be altered, use a pencil (don't let the tip touch the page) and follow your pencil tip with your eyes. Your eyes will not wander off as easily. It will not slow you down; in fact it will speed your reading up since you will be re-reading fewer lines.
- Subvocalize (read aloud barely audibly under your breath) while you read. This makes the information come in through two sensory channels instead of one, reinforcing its perception.

READING FOR BIAS, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF INTENT AND PERSPECTIVE:

Students do not just read for factual information to be absorbed and given back. They also must read critically, and appraisingly, evaluating the worth of ideas as they go. They also must be able to detect when an author is trying to lead them unwittingly into believing a particular perspective through the clever use of weighted, emotive or biased language. Try it yourself. Read the following accounts of the Battle at Lexington and see if you can spot the language devices being used to draw your mind to a particular conclusion. All three were considered to be reputable sources: the first, an American history textbook; the second a summary written by the Prime Minister of England during the Second World War; and the third, a sworn, legal affidavit from a soldier who was there. Who does each say started the American Revolution by firing the first shot? What would you want to know of each source before committing yourself to either believing or not believing?

THREE ACCOUNTS OF THE BATTLE AT LEXINGTON GREEN

I.

“In April, 1775, General Gage, the military governor of Massachusetts, sent out a body of troops to take possession of military stores at Concord, a short distance from Boston. At Lexington, a handful of embattled farmers, who had been tipped off by Paul Revere, barred the way. The “rebels” were ordered to disperse. They stood their ground.

The English fired a volley of shots that that killed eight patriots. It was not long before the swift-riding Paul Revere spread the news of this atrocity to the neighboring colonies, The patriots of all of New England, although still a handful, were now ready to fight the English. Even in faraway North Carolina patriots organized to resist them.”

(Samuel Steinberg, *United States History of a Free People*)

II.

“At five o’clock in the morning the local militia of Lexington, seventy strong, formed up on the village green. As the sun rose, the head of the British column, with three officers riding in front, came into view. The leading officer, brandishing his sword, shouted, “Disperse you rebels, immediately!”

The militia commander ordered his men to disperse. The colonial committees were very anxious not to fire the first shot and there were strict orders not to provoke open conflict with the British regulars. But in the confusion someone fired. A volley was returned. The ranks of the militia were thinned and there was a general melee. Brushing aside the survivors the British column marched on to Concord.”

(Winston Churchill, *History of the English Speaking Peoples*)

III.

“The British troops approached us rapidly in platoons, with a general officer on horseback at their head. The officer came up to within about two rods of the center of the company, where I stood, the first platoon being about three rods distant. They there halted. The officer then swung his sword, and said, 'Lay down your arms, you damned rebels, or you are all dead men. Fire! Some guns were fired by the British at us from the first platoon, but no person was killed or hurt, being probably charged only with powder.”

“Just at this time, Captain Parker ordered every man to take care of himself. The company immediately dispersed; and while the company was dispersing and leaping over the wall, the second platoon of the British fired and killed some of our men. There was not a gun fired by any of Captain Parker's company, within my knowledge.”

(Sylvanus Wood, sworn affidavit)

From www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/lexington