

Active Reading

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about strategies and best practices for efficient and productive reading. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Active Reading vs. Skimming or Speed-Reading

Active reading means engaging with what you read while you read it rather than just taking it in passively. An active reader approaches a text with an idea of what they want or need to get out of their reading experience and directs their reading in light of their goals.

The point of active reading is to get the most out of your reading experience—to help you arrive at a fuller and more complex understanding of what you've read. Practicing active reading is recommended whenever it's possible.

There are other methods of reading geared toward moving through a reading assignment more quickly. For example, skimming and speed-reading involve rapidly scanning the surface of a text and doing your best to pick out key points and main ideas as you race to the finish. In general, these techniques are a “quantity, not quality” approach to texts, and they are not ideal if the desired result is better comprehension and retention of your reading.

2. Active Reading, Comprehension, and Retention

Two of the main goals of active reading are comprehension and retention—to be able to understand the information provided by your reading and recall it accurately when you need it (like when you're taking a test). If you've spent a lot of time on your reading assignment, but you haven't understood any of it, this hasn't been an effective use of your time.

Similarly, if you've understood the information you read but failed to take steps to ensure that you'll remember it later, your efforts can be wasted. The value of time spent is lost if the information is lost. Active reading strategies are designed specifically to improve your reading comprehension and retention.

3. How to Read Actively

Before you start applying active reading strategies to improve your comprehension and retention, there are key elements to consider.



3a. Preparing to Read

An aspect to consider in how you read is your reading environment. Getting the most out of your reading starts with identifying the best place and the best conditions for you to work in. As much as possible, you want to minimize distractions and other obstacles or challenges to productive reading.

Different students may have different preferences but someplace quiet and comfortable is recommended. You also want to take care to ensure you have everything you need within reach when you sit down to read. In addition to the reading itself, this might include a pen, a highlighter, a snack, or a glass of water—have all the necessary supplies arrayed in front of you at your workspace. This way your work is less likely to be interrupted and you can focus entirely on the task at hand.

3b. Reading Assignment Requirements

Another key element of being prepared to read at an advanced level is understanding your reading assignment requirements. The basic information you need includes which texts you'll need and what format they are in—is the reading from a book or a course packet or is it posted or uploaded online?

You'll also need to know how many pages you are required to read and when you are required to have read them. But you also might ask yourself some more sophisticated questions about the purpose of the assignment: Is there anything specific you are meant to get out of the reading; in other words, is the reading pointed toward class discussion, a quiz, or an essay you will be writing? Why has the instructor assigned this particular reading assignment, and how does it function in the broader context of the course?

3c. Marking a Text and Taking Notes

Marking a text and taking notes are two of the most popular ways that students practice active reading. When you mark a text, you isolate words, phrases, or entire passages that you think are significant enough to revisit when you are rereading or studying. A marked text provides a record of your reading and evidences your active engagement with the text.

Common ways to mark a text include:

- Underlining
- Highlighting
- Circling
- Bracketing

The next step of active reading is taking notes, which you can do either right on the text (if you own the text), or in a separate document or notebook. A note might be a word or phrase or a more complete thought. Your notes represent and keep track of what you were thinking as you were reading. It's also worth noting that this practice is not just for pen and paper anymore. There are lots of ways to mark a text and take notes on a laptop or tablet. If you're not sure whether you have the capability, look into it!



SUMMARY

Skimming or speed-reading is not the same as **active reading**. Two goals of **active reading** are **comprehension and retention**. When **preparing to read actively**, it is important to actually **prepare to read**, consider the **reading assignment requirements**, and **mark a text and take notes**.