

Reading Actively

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the importance of active reading in an academic context, as well as how to approach this type of reading in order to be successful. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Active Reading and Purpose

2. Active Reading Strategies

2a. Interact with Your Texts

2b. Use Your Personal Knowledge

2c. Plan Ahead

1. Active Reading and Purpose

Academic reading assignments are challenging for many students, so if you find yourself struggling to complete them, know that you are not alone! Thankfully, there are methods you can use to make these assignments feel more manageable.

The most important of these methods is the practice of **active reading**, or a style of reading in which the reader purposefully engages with, analyzes, and asks questions about a text instead of simply absorbing the information passively. Note the use of the word "purposefully" in this definition. Identifying your purpose, or reason, for reading is important so that you can approach the reading in a way that will fulfill that purpose.

When reading in an academic context, your general purpose is probably to complete the task your instructor has assigned; however, to figure out your more specific purpose for reading, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- What type of academic reading is this (e.g., textbook, article, short story, etc.)?
- Why did my instructor assign this reading, and how does it relate to the course?
- How am I expected to show my understanding of this reading (e.g., answer quiz questions, write a response, discuss the reading in class)?



TERM TO KNOW

Active Reading

Reading that involves purposefully engaging with, analyzing, and asking questions about a text, rather than passively absorbing the information.

2. Active Reading Strategies

While the reading process can vary slightly depending on your purpose and assignment, the following strategies can be helpful for practicing successful active reading in most academic contexts, no matter the type of text.

2a. Interact with Your Texts

You've probably thought or heard someone say that you shouldn't write in your books because then you can sell them back for more, but if you are concerned about money, think of the other side of this example: If you aren't interacting with the book you purchased, you aren't getting the value out of it that you originally paid.

Readings in college are meant to be marked up. This process is called **annotation**, or the act of writing notes directly in a text while reading in order to expand on, comment on, or question the author's words and ideas. You cannot make the most of your reading experiences if you do not write questions that arise, or note connections.

To help you interact with a text, or piece of reading material, more naturally, think of your reading experience as you would a conversation with someone— especially someone you might not know well. If all that happens is that the other person talks to you while you sit passively, you may well get some information, but you will be unable to get clarification, ask questions, or think about the larger context. Conversation works best when all the people involved are active participants. Think of reading similarly.



TERM TO KNOW

Annotation

The act of writing notes directly in a text while reading in order to expand on, comment on, or question the author's words and ideas.

2b. Use Your Personal Knowledge

Though college involves a lot of reading on subjects or topics that are new to you, your prior knowledge can still help. Try to connect readings to what you already know, even if that isn't a lot.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might be reading about genetics for your biology class and remember traits or characteristics that have been passed down through your own family. What you learned from your family background could help you contextualize the reading.

Perhaps you don't know the word "mnemonic," but it means something that assists with memory. One trick to helping you retain knowledge during reading is to apply the information you read to what you already know about a topic.

2c. Plan Ahead

You probably learned long ago that you can't read the 200-page text that is the basis for your book report the day before the paper is due; however, you might not have thought much about shorter readings.

Remember, reading in college is more difficult than it was in high school, so even that 20-page chapter might be more work than it sounds like. Since you will be taking notes and thinking critically about the material, it might be a good idea to stop once in a while or break up even shorter pieces. You may be able to read a shorter article in one sitting, but you might want to go back at a later time to reread it.



HINT

Reading something multiple times, especially something that is particularly challenging, will generally improve your understanding of the material. If you can do your reading in a distraction-free environment, that will also increase your ability to make sense of the material and to commit it to memory.

You know your reading habits and capabilities better than anyone else, but don't push ahead if you find yourself zoning out or forgetting information—these are signs that it is time to take a break and return with a clear head later. This is why it is important to get to reading assignments early and leave time to come back to them if you need to do so.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that active reading is a best practice for approaching academic reading assignments. **Active reading and purpose** are closely linked, as active reading involves reading a text with a specific intent in mind. You also learned some **strategies for active reading** that can come in handy for any type of text you may be assigned. These strategies include **interacting with your texts** by considering reading a conversation between yourself and the material as you make notes, **using your personal knowledge** to put ideas from the reading in context, and **planning ahead** to ensure you have time to take breaks and reread the material if necessary.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Strategies for Active Reading" tutorial.



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