Reading with a Purpose
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Before you can begin to write a report, essay, thesis, or any document, an important first step is to gather information, primarily by reading. Throughout your university career you will do a lot of reading, and you will interact with many different types of documents (textbooks, articles, policies, novels, lab reports, and so on) in order to inform your writing. Yet, often times, we find ourselves at the bottom of a page not really understanding or even remembering what we just read. In order to get more out of your reading, it is important to be actively engaged in the reading process.

Mental Preparation – What is your Purpose?

This process begins before you ever turn the first page, when you mentally, and physically, prepare for reading. It must be noted that the way you read a text will be different depending on the type of assignment and the type of document under consideration. For example, if you are reading a scientific report to retrieve factual content, you will be focused differently than if you are analyzing the mood created through the use of metaphor in a poem. Understanding the purpose of your reading and what you need to achieve after completing the reading are critical to preparing yourself mentally. With regard to physical preparation, active reading requires undivided attention; therefore, the conditions must be conducive to concentration. Ideally, this includes a positive attitude, alert energy level, and an environment free from distractions.

Strategies

Once you are physically and mentally prepared, active reading strategies can help translate words on a page or screen into ideas and learning. Francis Pleasant Robinson (1970) was a pioneer in the field of active reading and developed the SQ3R method for improving reading comprehension—Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. Although this process was initially developed to help students learn and retain content, it is also useful for understanding material used in your writing.

The Survey step requires the reader to mentally prepare for the content by briefly skimming the text, paying particular attention to the titles, headings, and visuals, in order to anticipate what the piece will be about. If it is a longer document, reading the abstract, and/or the introduction and conclusion can help the reader identify content themes. This may be useful when surveying peer-reviewed articles to see if they inform you about your topic. It may also be helpful to mentally prepare by thinking about how this document links to things they already know about this subject and related areas.

The Question phase requires the reader to formulate questions about what the main ideas of the piece may be. Turning the headings and subheadings into questions can help to frame your reading. Also, think about what you would like to know about this particular subject. Familiarize yourself with the specific assignment questions, or focus on your research questions, before you begin reading. You will remember more information if you read with questions in your mind.

The first “R” is to Read the text. Active reading means reading slowly and methodically looking for answers to the questions you formulated earlier. It is recommended that you read one section at a time
and think about how you would translate the content into your own words. Writing notes in the margin, in a word document or a notebook, to summarize main ideas is an excellent strategy for improving comprehension. Be sure to investigate unfamiliar terms, ideas, and vocabulary or ask a colleague or professor to clarify. Depending on the assignment, you may be required to note the tone, point of view, and use of literary techniques by the author. Your thoughts about stylistic elements and validity of the information can also be noted in the margins as you read. If keeping notes in an electronic file, be sure to use different font styles, for example, to distinguish your thoughts from summary statements about the author(s)’s original ideas.

The second “R” is Recite. This phase is when you identify the ideas, themes, and theories from the piece as a whole and record them. Although highlighting can be an effective way to identify key ideas in a piece of writing, often times highlighting is overused and does not lead to improved understanding. It is much more effective to write notes summarizing the main points in your own words, either in the margin, on yellow sticky notes, in a notebook, or in a word document. This will take more time initially, but will lead to benefits in terms of comprehension and retention, which will then allow you to write more clearly about your topic.

It can also be helpful to say the main ideas out loud in addition to writing them down. Find opportunities to discuss ideas, which will allow you to engage with the material and clarify your thoughts. The more senses that are engaged in the process, the deeper the comprehension of the material. Here you will identify the key points the author is trying to make, and you will reflect on what you have learned. You can also note your perspective on the topic and what questions are still outstanding.

The final “R” is to Review. If you are reading for study purposes, go back to your notes within 24 hours to reinforce the learning. If you are writing a paper, review your notes. Spend time thinking about the links between different authors’ perspectives. That thinking will be valuable to your paper’s development.

In academic reading, students should not just be looking at words and content, although these things are important. Instructors are also looking for students to evaluate the credibility of the author, to sort out fact from opinions, and to think about whether you agree or disagree with the author and why. Active reading will allow you to integrate content with previous knowledge, draw conclusions, and raise further questions. Successful active reading will ultimately lead to better writing.

Sources used to develop this handout:
