

Reading Strategies

When you read the latest Dan Brown novel or the directions for your new toaster, you probably don't need to consciously use special reading strategies. In your college courses, however, you'll be reading dense, sometimes difficult texts—that is, really rewarding material that is worth taking full intellectual ownership of. Here are some practical strategies for making the most of your encounters with important texts.

Strong, critical readers routinely read complex texts several times. You don't have to understand everything the writer says the first time through. Being a strong reader doesn't necessarily mean being a fast reader, but a careful reader who makes note of their responses to the ideas presented in a text.

Pre-Read

Plan. Find a quiet, suitable place to read. If you're at your desk, consider turning off your computer so you can really concentrate. Divide long readings into manageable sections and reserve short chunks of time for your reading.

Preview. Read the title, introduction, and any headings and subheadings if they exist. Who is the author? Is any information given that will help you understand where he or she is coming from—the context? Also, read any assignment questions beforehand.

As You Read

Mark ideas that jump out at you by highlighting, underlining, or starring. There is no "correct" way of marking; just use whatever works for you. Try to underline less than 10% of the text for most effective review.

Ask questions. Sometimes just a "?" in the margin will do. Sometimes you'll want to write the question out in full. Note any confusion, doubt, or concern. Circle words you want to look up later.

Comment. Add personal asides. In the margins or in your notes, record what you think and as well as your gut responses to what you're reading.

Make connections between the author's ideas and your experiences.

Paraphrase or Recite. When you have finished each page, section, or chapter, try to recite key points aloud or write down in your own words what the author has been saying. If you put another person's words into your own way of speaking, it will make much more sense to you.

Just keep going. Don't let a difficult or boring passage stall you. If you read on, you may find clarification.

Reread the text several times, especially those passages that were confusing or raised questions.

After You Read

Review the notes you have made. This will help you make sense of the ideas presented in the text, make connections between those ideas and your own, and spark new ideas of your own.

Respond to the reading by writing your opinion in your journal. This will give you more raw material with which to work when it comes time to write a formal essay.

Discuss the reading with a classmate or friend. Often we make more sense of a text when we discuss the ideas it presents with someone else.

Trade Secret

Here is a central fact that successful students and scholars know and less successful readers often do not: Not all books have to be read at the same speed, in the same way. Think about what you need to get out of the text and what kind of text it is, and then be honest with yourself about how much work you'll need to put into it.

Mortimer Adler wrote this in 1939, in his famous work, *How to Read a Book*:

I have seen many students read a difficult book just as if they were reading the sports page. Sometimes I would ask at the beginning of class if they had any questions about the text, if there was anything they did not understand. Their silence answered in the negative. At the end of the two hours, during which they could not answer the simplest questions leading to an interpretation of the book, they would admit their deficiency in a puzzled way. They were puzzled because they were quite honest in their belief that they had read the text. They had, but not in the right way.