

A GUIDE TO ACTIVE READING AND ASKING QUESTIONS: A HANDOUT FOR STUDENTS

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ACTIVE READING

Students often read a course text from beginning to end in order to prepare for class. Much to their dismay, they probably forget much of what they have read and are not really prepared to participate in discussion. An 'active' approach to preparing a text is necessary. This means seeking out its internal logic, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and developing a critical perspective on it. Following the suggestions in this guide will help you to develop these skills which are critical to university success.

TIME MANAGEMENT AND READING

Most students, especially those in first year, seriously underestimate the time it takes to read and prepare course material. In fact, reading is probably the most time-consuming and important of all the activities you will undertake as a university student. Not only must you allocate sufficient time to do your reading, but also to develop the critical skills that will help you process what you read.

Studies show that students think they ought to be able to read a page per minute, but in fact 4-6 minutes per page is a more realistic estimate. Test yourself: for one of the course readings, estimate how long it will take you to read it. Then time yourself. The more you are aware of the time required, the better able you will be to plan effectively.

READING THE TEXT: MAKING NOTES, HIGHLIGHTING, AND SUMMARIZING

As you proceed through a reading, you may have developed strategies to identify, mark, and summarize important information. The most popular way of marking key information is to highlight the text or underline passages that you can return to later. In general, the process of marking the text is a good one. However, some students highlight too much and too quickly. As soon as they notice something important, they will begin marking. Students may not have actually read and processed the material but they assume, that once marked, they will return to it later. Going back often doesn't happen because the volume of highlighted material overwhelms students.

A few suggestions to improve your marking strategies.

1. Start by reading the introductory and concluding paragraphs. This will prepare you for reading the more detailed argument and help you to understand the author's purpose.

TIP: If you have run out of time to complete all your readings, read the introduction, titles, headings, sub-headings, and conclusion in order to get a general sense about the text.

2. Read an entire section between headings before highlighting. In this way, you can see the development of the whole idea. You will probably find a concise re-statement of the author's argument toward the end which will be especially helpful in writing an annotation.

3. Instead of underlining or highlighting across the page, use a pencil to make a vertical mark along the margin. This prevents interruption of your reading/thinking while still allowing you to identify that section for later consideration. Using a pencil rather than a highlighter permits changes at a later date, and also allows you to write comments and questions on the text.

4. Circle any concepts you come across. If you are unclear about the meaning of the concept, bring a query to your tutorial or to your study group.

5. Use a question mark to identify any material you don't understand. Don't be stopped by your confusion. Often material at a later point will clarify.

When students have difficulties with a reading, they often think the problem is because they are unable to understand it. However, sometimes the problem is a lack of clarity or a confusion in the text itself. Learning to identify such weaknesses

is key to being a successful university scholar.

6. Use a * to mark points that provoked, challenged and/or intrigued you.

7. Using your own words in the margin to explain briefly an idea or note its importance is more effective than using the words of the author. Rephrasing ideas into your own words forces you to think the idea through and process its meaning.

This section is adapted from "Reading Skills for University", prepared by the Counselling and Development Centre, York University. See also "Note-Taking at University" <<http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/index.htm>>.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Students often think that their role is to answer questions and that the role of teachers is to ask questions. This is not true. The effective student is able to ask questions, not only of the teacher but also of the text (any written material). The effective student learns to act like the teacher, always asking questions.

The ability to ask questions is a test of your understanding of the material. It depends upon careful reading and comprehension and if the question is about a lecture, upon careful listening. Asking questions depends upon your ability to pick out the most important ideas, to focus on the construction of the argument, to identify potentially weak links in the evidence, and to make associations with other knowledge that you have already acquired, that is, to make comparisons between texts. Out of this question-asking process, you will develop your own point of view on the material -- a key to a successful student and a good scholar.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

You can ask questions before you read a text in order to guide your reading. This will help you to focus your attention on what you are reading and, in particular, to pick out the main ideas. While you are reading, you will be looking for the answers to your questions.

Pre-reading is part of a process of previewing a text. Before you begin to read or formulate questions, look through an article, read the introduction, the headings, and the concluding paragraph.

Then you are ready to formulate pre-reading questions. These can be generated by looking over the chapter headings and subheadings (or topic sentences) before you begin reading. For example, some of the subheadings in a reading on "Beauty, Status and Aging" are:

- Brief Historical Backdrop
- Aging and Women's Differential Life Experience
- Assumptions and Presumptions about Aging Women
- Standards of Beauty
- Beauty as a Constant
- Beauty as Youth

Without knowing anything about the content of the chapter, you could ask the following questions:

- What is the historical background for current views about beauty, status and aging (from the title of article)?
- What is the relationship between women's life experience and their patterns of aging?
- What assumptions are made about aging women?
- What are the standards of beauty in our society?
- What does it mean to talk about 'beauty as a constant'?
- What is the relation between beauty and youth?

As you can see, it is not difficult to generate such questions. And they will help direct your reading. When asking these kind of questions, it is usually a good idea to work with a small portion of the text. If you have a book to read, ask questions for each chapter, or better yet, for each section of a chapter. Answers to these questions provide a framework for taking notes on the text, and also a useful mechanism to self-test later. If you cannot answer one of your pre-reading questions, bring it to your tutorial.

AFTER YOU READ THE TEXT

After you read the text and have answered your pre-reading questions, you need to step back from the details of the material and make some assessments.

1. Ask yourself if you have understood the material. Are there any words, ideas, concepts or arguments in the chapter/article that you did not understand? Formulate specific questions to bring to your tutorial.

The more specific the questions you ask of your teachers and classmates, the more willing and able they will be to respond to them. For example, a student who says to a teacher, "I don't understand the chapter" will get a less positive response than a student who says, "I don't understand the argument on pp. 10-11." Why is this the case?

2. Answer the following questions:

What questions are the authors trying to answer?

What is the authors' main point/argument? Why is it important?

What is the method of data collection and analysis?

What are the key supporting details and evidence? Any weaknesses in the argument?

Does the evidence support the conclusions?

What do the authors take-for-granted, that is, what assumptions do they make? Have they left any unanswered questions?

In what ways do you agree/disagree with the point of view, the argument, the conclusions?

How does this text compare with the other texts on the same topic? Do all authors make the same argument?

What areas of disagreement? Who is more persuasive?

What have you learned? How have your views changed as a result of reading this material?

STUDY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Sometimes teachers will develop study questions to help guide your reading and focus tutorial discussion. Unlike pre-reading questions, they are based on a prior reading of the text and so are more specific and detailed.

DEGREES OF DIFFICULTY

There are different levels of study/discussion questions, each of which involves different skills and different degrees of difficulty. For each of your course readings, undertake to write a level 2/3/4 question.

Level One: Level One questions involve recognition and recall, that is, being able to locate and reproduce pieces of factual information. In general, level one questions ask, "What did the author say?" For example, "To what occupational categories do most women workers belong?" Usually there is only one right answer to this level of question. Most university assignments will not ask you Level One assignments.

Level Two: Level Two questions require a greater contribution on the part of the learner than merely locating or recognizing directly stated information. Level Two questions ask, "What did the author mean?" The reader must be able to comprehend and interpret the material, not just recall it. Level Two questions ask you to identify and explain concepts and the logic of arguments. For example, "Explain the concept of the feminization of poverty." Or "How does the author explain the increase in the number of women who are poor?"

Level Three: Level Three questions involve the learner in analyzing facts and inferences. This type of critical comprehension requires the reader to apply, analyze, and synthesize material. It may involve evaluation of the material as well as the integration of material from several sources. For example, "Evidence suggests that older women are seriously devalued in our society? Do you agree? Why or why not?" Or "Draw out the connections between the devaluation of older women and the problems that younger women face around body image."

Level Four: Level Four questions ask the learner to utilize new information in original ways. This level of understanding requires the greatest contribution on the part of the learner. Questions of this kind could be called 'creative comprehension questions' or 'complex problem solving.' For example, "Toronto faces serious problems around the issue of racism and sexism. Use concepts from course readings to explain why these problems are occurring. Develop an action plan to address these problems."

QUESTIONS ABOUT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND ATTITUDES

Some questions are less analytical in their focus. They may draw on personal experience and attitudes. These questions ask learners whether the arguments and presentation in the texts are consistent with their own experience and whether the readings have expanded or shifted their understanding of that experience. Other questions may ask about emotional responses to material: discomfort, anger, excitement, resistance, denial, enthusiasm etc.

ASKING QUESTIONS TO PREPARE FOR TESTS AND EXAMS

A student who has learned the course material should be able to anticipate the questions that will be asked on tests/exams. Teachers do not design tests to trick students or on the basis of any obscure principles, but rather to test students' knowledge of the material. Since it is not possible to cover all areas, teachers will tend to ask questions about the most important material. Students who can identify and understand the most important material will also be able to predict the test questions. These anticipated questions can be the basis for your test preparation program. Self-testing is a very successful studying strategy and can help reduce test anxiety.

When you are preparing for tests/exams, you should try to find out what level of questions your teachers intend to ask. It is obvious that university tests and exams do not rely on Level One questions of recognition and recall. Thus you have to adjust your studying to prepare for the other kinds of questions. For example, memorization will only help you prepare to answer Level One questions; the other three levels of questions involve an increasing degree of understanding and creativity.

For more information, see "Preparing for Exams at University: Tips to help you make the grade!" <http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/index.htm> (and scroll down to section on exams) and "Preparing for Tests and Exams" <http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/eponline/exam>.

