

# Reading like a College Student

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## Step 1: Read What You Like

My Dad has been a life-long educator, and I consider him a very wise and smart person. One article he wrote many years ago was inspired by a teacher who contacted him for help, telling him, "11 of my 29 students can't read our social studies text." This was a fifth-grade teacher, and I've paraphrased my father's response as a dialogue below:

"Suppose you wanted to learn to drive an automobile?" asks my father. "What would be the best way to go about it?"

The teacher replied, "Well, drive. You *have* to sit in the car and drive." "And how would one improve their driving?"

The teacher shrugged and answered, "Drive more, I guess."

My father nodded, and asked, "And isn't that true of anything? Playing piano? Dancing? Fixing your car?" He paused and then added, "So, what do your students need to do?"

"To read..." started the teacher and then said, "But that's the problem, they can't read the text."

"Maybe it's the car that's the problem," posited my father. "You wouldn't drive a big rig or a sports car until you'd driven a regular car, would you?"

The teacher got it and decided, with Dad's help and advice, to allow them an hour of reading a day on any topic they chose. Two months after initiating the experiment, the results were excellent. Not only were the 11 students capable of reading the social studies text, but they, as well as the other students, were doing much better in all other aspects of the school curriculum.

Thus reading, any reading, will help you in college. Spend time reading things you want to read. *Harry Potter*? Comic books? Maybe you're really interested in World War II. There is a lot of stuff out there. Self-help books? Mysteries? Fantasy? Everything about the car you just bought? Religious books from one or more world religions like the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Talmud*? Philosophy? The best way to become a better reader is to read. And you will get better faster if you read things you're really interested in instead of starting with textbooks. Choose your book(s) and find a quiet place to begin reading. Make time for your reading, and start now if you haven't already.

### **Step 2: How Did They Do That?**

Once you've chosen books (or other kinds of texts) that you like, you should begin to study them. How does the author start the text you are reading? What makes a particular piece of dialogue compelling? Why does your genre (the type of book you are reading) connect to you? Be specific and consider what choices the author made? Treat every word as intentional, as if the author put them there, in that order, for a reason. Treat your reading in the same way, intentionally, with purpose. Instead of just reading to find some bolded words for a test, read to understand not just the content but the structure and art of the text itself. Appreciate the mastery and creativity of words. And if you start with books on topics you like, you'll find you know a surprising amount about the intentions of the authors because you share some of their interests.

### **Step 3: Write**

It might seem strange that one of the best ways to read like a college student is to write, but it can help a lot. While many of you are comfortable writing on a computer, for this task to be most effective, your best bet is to write by hand. Don't worry if your handwriting is terrible; these notes are just for you. And be sure to start with the book that

you like. As you study the books you enjoy, write down your thoughts. Doing so by hand will slow down your mind a bit and help you focus. Check that your notes make sense and that they fit with what you've read. You can write anything: a summary, an explanation, a reaction. It's your space. Go wild!

While reading and taking notes, you will often want a dictionary (or internet access) right there to look up the meaning of words that were new to you (yes, there are apps for that). And as you read more books, you will start to realize that each subject you are studying has its own vocabulary and systems. A fictional story, for example, varies considerably from a science magazine or a math textbook. Figure out how they differ. When working with more technical texts start looking for chapter names, section headers, and bolded or italicized words and any pictures and graphs that might be there. Carefully read their labels and any sidebars. And when something doesn't make sense, write it down as a comment or phrased as a question in your notes.

#### **Step 4: Ask Questions**

No one can figure everything out on their own. That's why you're in college, to get help in understanding the world, to broaden your knowledge of yourself, and develop skills that will help you succeed in life. And to do that—and to learn anything, really—you need to ask questions. The questions from your notes when reading will prove to be some of your most valuable tools. Save those questions and ask a classmate and/or your teacher to help you understand. Make a habit of it. Smart students ask questions, even if they aren't quite sure what to ask. Use the text and your notes as a reference. A lot of students feel like they are stupid for not knowing something, but that shame just gets in the way of a good education. Ask! Your teachers are here to help. And don't neglect your peers either. Sometimes they can say something in a way that you'll understand better than when a teacher says it. So, use your resources wisely.

## **Step 5: Be Strategic**

Reading, Studying, Writing, and Asking Questions are great ways to begin reading like a college student, but there are times you will be overwhelmed. If you take many classes it is likely that sometimes professors may assign (collectively) more reading than you can handle in a normal fashion. And sometimes they assign more than you can read to give you an overview of ideas or to read a text they will discuss in class in greater depth. Either way you need to be strategic about how you read in college.

First you need to figure out why you are reading a given text. Are you reading it to get background on important issues? To illuminate some of the central issues in a single session of one course? To raise questions for discussion? To understand terms on a test? Read assignments carefully to know. Generally, teachers write exactly what they mean. And as in our last step, don't be afraid to ask. Knowing the assignment expectations is half the battle.

A good trick to learn for lots of kinds of reading, or a first pass over a text, is skimming. Skimming is not just reading in a hurry, or reading sloppily, or reading the last line and the first line. It's a disciplined activity where you are trying to identify key points. A good skimmer has a systematic technique for finding the most information in the least amount of time by looking for key words (or signposts) that point the way, reading the topic sentences of paragraphs as well as conclusions, and, as in step 3, taking notes. See the student resources canvas page for more advice on skimming.

When reading more deeply, there are generally three aspects of a text you should be aware of. First, make sure you can craft a basic summary. Do you know what happened or what argument is being made? Can you describe it in your own words? If you can't, go back up to step 3 and ask someone who can help. The other elements won't work if you don't understand what the text is saying. Second, consider how the text is trying to persuade you and what its argument is. We're using the term "persuade" here loosely, as any text will

have a message or argument to communicate, and often the summary doesn't clearly provide that, but the keys to understanding in greater depth are there. And lastly, always ask why the text and its points matter, both in general and for your assignments. Your teachers work hard to choose texts that will help you in your education. Don't miss the opportunities those readings provide. And remember our steps. A little extra work reading can pay off in school and in years to come.