

Active Reading

While reading can be interesting and enjoyable, it is an inefficient way to learn. The human mind is geared towards learning from experience, and we learn and remember things better when we *do them*, not when we hear about them nor when we read about them. In order to optimize your studying, you need to apply this knowledge to the course reading material. You can improve your understanding of the readings, and your ability to recall material from the readings, if you work to engage the readings actively.

It is not very efficient simply to go through the readings word by word in a linear fashion. Frequently, you will find it more helpful to start by going through the article or chapter and noting the section headings and subheadings. These form an outline for the reading, and help you understand how the author is developing her argument and points. As you skip through the chapter or article, read the portions that appear to be most interesting, to get the gist of the reading.

Once you have a sense of the reading, go back to the beginning and read through the article carefully, to fill in the details. Using active reading strategies during this second pass through will help you understand and retain the material much better.

Active reading means you strive to *interact* with the readings. Think of reading as a conversation with the author of the book or article. As you go along, ask questions as though you were speaking with the author. For example, ask “where is the author going with this? what will her next point be?” or “on what basis did he draw these conclusions? what evidence does he present to support his statements?” Asking questions as you read makes the process more active, and increases your brain’s capacity to absorb, process, and recall the material.

Highlighting text and taking notes are other ways to convert reading from a passive to an active endeavor. As you read, underline or highlight important points, definitions, and passages you find difficult. Make notes in the margins so you can find important passages easily. Write questions in the margins about the points the author is making. Use a separate sheet of paper to summarize the reading. These are good study habits to develop, that will benefit you for many years.

Taking notes not only helps you remember the material, but you can use these notes later to prepare for exams or to write papers based on the reading. If you ask questions as you read, your notes will give you a particular perspective that will be valuable in writing answers to essay questions on exams.

Finally, it is helpful to revisit the reading a day or two later, skimming through, reading the highlighted passages, and going through your notes to remember what the author said.

If you put these suggestions into practice, you will probably find that your ability to understand and remember the material will be enhanced, and the course material will be more interesting and meaningful to you.