Getting the Most from Your Textbooks

Adapted from material prepared by the Learning Skills Center, Indiana University

Why are textbooks important?
You go to class. You take notes. Why do you need a textbook? Textbooks and classroom lectures talk about the same thing, don’t they? No. Lectures are often the teacher’s view of the material being covered. Textbooks sometimes give more in-depth information and examples. They may also give different views than those the teacher presents. A textbook is not a substitute for lectures. Use both of them to learn the most about a subject.

How can I get the most out of my textbooks?
Follow these simple steps before you read, while you read, and after you read to get the most from your textbooks.

Before you read

- Figure out how much time you will take to read the section. Plan to spend that much time to finish the section.

- Find a quiet place to read, without distractions.

- Focus on what you are going to read, without distractions.

- Look at the chapter briefly before you start reading. This is called previewing. This simple step only takes a few minutes but is well worth your time.

How do I preview?

→ **Read the title of the chapter or section.** From the title, think about what might be in the chapter. Think about what you already know about the subject.

→ **Scan the chapter, reading the headings and subheadings.** These are signposts. They guide you. They tell what topics will be covered and how they are organized.

→ **Study the illustrations.** Don’t skip pictures, tables, charts, maps, and graphs. Study them.

→ **Read the first paragraph of each section.** This is called the introductory paragraph. The author introduces the topic in the first paragraph. This paragraph may tell you about the points covered in the section. It may tell why the topic is important or how it will be presented.

→ **Read the final paragraph of each section.** Skip to the end and read the closing paragraph. Here the author may summarize the argument, restate the main points, or add some final thoughts on the topic.

→ **Now skim through the chapter quickly.** Look at the headings. How is the chapter organized? It may be divided into main points, time periods, or steps that have to be followed. Understanding how the material is organized, will help you as you read.
Previewing will only take a few minutes. These few minutes will help you understand the topic much better when you start to read. Don’t skip the preview step. You will get much more from your reading if you preview it.

While you read

- Break the chapter into sections. Use the subheadings to guide you as you do this.

- Turn each heading and subheading into a question. Answer the question as you read. For example, if a heading reads ‘The Industrial Revolution,’ ask yourself: What was the Industrial Revolution? When did the industrial Revolution take place? Why is the Industrial Revolution important?

- When you get to the end of each section, make a mental summary of it. Mentally change the wording of the summary until it is very clear. Then, write the summary in your notes.

- As you make notes, use your own words. Think of examples from your own life. Tips for taking notes from your textbook can be found on the next page.

- Have a mental conversation with the author. Ask the author questions as you go along. As you finish the section, answer those questions. If you can’t answer them, write them down to ask a classmate or the teacher later.

After you read

- Review the subsection, sections, and chapter. Think about what you’ve read.

- Relate what you’ve read to the class lectures or other sources of information.

- Are there questions given in your textbook? Answer them. If not, make up some questions.

- Is there something in the reading that you don’t understand? Write it down and ask about it in class. Do you have a comment about the reading? Write in down and bring it up during the next class.

- Review the material often. Short, quick reviews will help you remember and understand the information better. This will also help you prepare for exams. Do you want to remember more? Review often and regularly. If you study for tests by ‘cramming’ at the last minute, you will probably be too confused and tired to do well.

How do I take notes from my textbook?

Finish reading a section or chapter before you take any notes.

Be very selective. Only take notes on important information. Pay attention to
- lists of things.
- ideas the author says are “very important” or “most significant.”
- points which summarize the chapter title, headings, or subheadings.

Make your notes short, but include enough information to make the idea clear.
Use your own words. You’ll remember your own words much better than someone else’s.

How do you organize your notes? You don’t need a formal outline. You do need to recognize two patterns in your reading.

1. **Learn to recognize the parts in a paragraph.**
Organize your notes according to this pattern.
   - The **topic sentence** states the main point of the paragraph. It is usually the first sentence in the paragraph.
   - **Supporting sentences** give facts, details, and examples. They explain the main ideas.
   - The **concluding sentence** sums up the paragraph. It may give conclusions based on information in the paragraph. Sometimes the concluding sentence restates the topic sentence.

Sometimes a section can have topic paragraphs, supporting paragraphs and concluding paragraphs.

2. **Learn to recognize how the author organized the material.** The author may use different types of organization. Some types are listed here.
   - **Time** – Events are given in the order in which they happened. Look for dates and phases such as “in the early years,” “five years later,” and “during the next two years.”
   - **Process** – Steps or events are given in the order in which the process takes place. Look for words such as “first,” “next,” “then,” and “finally.”
   - **Place or Space** – Things are discussed in terms of their location or their place in relation to other things. For example, from left to right, high to low, large to small.
   - **Importance** – Items can be listed from most important to least important, or from least important to most important.
   - **Cause and Effect** – The author may describe events or problems first, then explain how or why they happened. Or, the author may describe a situation, then explain what happened because of this situation. Why something happened is the **cause**, and what happened is the **effect**.
   - **Compare and Contrast** – Items may be discussed by looking at how they are similar or different. **Compare** means to look at similarities. **Contrast** means to look at differences. Sometimes teachers will ask you to ‘compare’ two things. They may want you to discuss similarities. Or, they may want you to discuss both similarities and differences. **Make sure you know what the teacher really wants you to do.**

As you read, make up your own categories to help you organize the facts and ideas in the text. It is easier to memorize information that you feel makes sense and is in order. Organize the material whatever way works best for you. There are lots of ways to organize things. You may decide to organize information by the **main points** and the supporting details, the **relationships** between the main ideas, the **central characters**, by the **important dates**, or by some other way that seems right for that information.