

Active Reading of Textbooks

The reading you do at Princeton differs in two significant ways from the reading you did in high school. Not only are you asked to complete longer assignments in a shorter period of time, but also you are expected to analyze and evaluate what you read with more sophistication and skill.

Professors expect you not only to comprehend what you read, but also to be able to do something with it: talk or write about the material in an engaged and complex fashion, apply information or concepts to a new scenario or problem, or solve a problem you haven't gone over in class, just to mention a few.

The strategies listed below will help you to do a large quantity of reading without the tedium or frustration that sometimes results from having a lot to read. It will also help you to retain more of the key concepts and information that you will need to know for exams. While this method is more applicable to textbook reading, you can modify it for reading literature or other more narrative type material.

Although following this five-step active-reading method might take more time than reading in a more passive way, you'll find that doing so saves you time in the long run in two significant ways; 1) you'll have great notes for reviewing for exams, and 2) you'll learn the material so well that reviewing will take a fraction of the time.

Step 1: Survey

Skim the chapter, reading only the chapter title, subtitles, italicized terms, boldface type, and introductory or summary sections. Make mental predictions about what you think the chapter will discuss.

You can also write notes as you go along and then look over these notes before proceeding to the next step.

Step 2: Question

Change all chapter titles, subtitles, sections, and paragraph headings into questions. For example, the section heading "The Gas Laws of Boyle, Charles, and Avogadro" might become "What are the gas laws of Boyle, Charles, and Avogadro?" Similarly, you could transform "Distinguishing Heredity and Environment" into "How does one distinguish heredity from environment?" These questions become "hooks" on which to hang the reading material.

Write these questions out in a reading journal, leaving plenty of room for notes. Look over the questions to see the emphasis and overall direction of them. Determine if there are any questions you can answer before doing the reading.

Step 3: Read

Read the chapter section by section for the purpose of answering the questions generated in Step 2.

Step 4: Recall

Without looking at your book or notes, mentally visualize and sketch in your own words, the high points of the material immediately upon completing the reading.

Step 5: Review

Look at your questions, answers, notes and book to see how well you actually recalled the reading (i.e. completed Step 4). Observe carefully the points you recalled incorrectly or simply omitted. Fix carefully in your mind the logical sequence of the entire idea or problem, or of all the concepts covered in each section or chapter. Finish up with a mental picture of the WHOLE concept, paragraph, or chapter you've just covered.

Note: The bulk of your time should be used for Steps 4 & 5