

Reading a Textbook

Chances are that you have had to read a textbook for a class at some point in your educational career. However, it's important to read *actively* instead of *passively* reading the text.

Importance of this Skill

Reading a textbook is more than it seems: you are taking in unfamiliar information and deriving knowledge from the components. Actively reading is like working a muscle, and improving this lifelong skill allows you to apply it in a multitude of scenarios—news articles, nutrition facts on the back of a cereal box, the terms and conditions before you click “accept”—the list goes on. Reading also improves your critical thinking, so it's important to practice this skill as much as possible!

Using AI Text Summarizers

With AI and its convenient ability to summarize text in the blink of an eye, recognizing its limitations is important. Reading an AI-generated chapter outline will never surpass putting in the work yourself. It is a surface-level interpretation with possible inaccuracies, whereas reading independently lets you choose both the breadth *and* depth of information. It also ensures your own understanding of the given topic.

You cannot learn content effectively without exercising your thinking and analyzing skills. While struggling with a challenging task is inevitable, never underestimate your own capabilities. You can be your own solution.

Dos and Don'ts of Reading a Textbook

DO consider what factors are important based on personal need and preference, and then come up with a goal to know what parts of the text to focus on. What will be tested on the exam? What is the instructor lecturing about? If you're genuinely interested in the topic, why not do a more thorough pass of the reading?

DON'T feel like you must read every single word. You can if you want to—especially if the topic interests you—but it would be time consuming, and you could easily get overwhelmed by details. Reading every word could lead to focusing on topics that might not be important.

DO use subheadings within textbook chapters and keywords to help guide you while skimming and determining important information. These points will be discussed later in the handout.

DON'T gloss over large amounts of text without reason! A good rule of thumb is to “work smart, not hard” or “do the least for the most”—make sure that you still have a thorough

understanding while being efficient. You might have already been skimming subconsciously, but check if you understand the content or if you need the extra time to process any concepts.

Textbook Breakdown

Reading a textbook is less intimidating when broken down into digestible steps. This handout is organized in three stages: previewing, skimming, and reviewing.

Previewing

Previewing begins with the introduction of the chapter. Here, you can find general context to orient yourself with the topic, as well as objectives or core concepts to focus on. They can also conveniently identify sections for you to skip if the professor isn't covering it.

Setting up an outline in the previewing stage gives you a basic framework to take notes with while skimming the text. A basic outline structure can be found below, but tailoring it to your personal preference is recommended.

Chapter 1 - *Chapter Name*

Heading → main point

Subheader → individual concept

- definitions
- explanations
- other important points

Skimming

You will dedicate most of your reading time to this step. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, here are general tips to get you started.

- Focus on underlined, **bolded**, or *italicized* words because they signify importance!
 - Look in the margins or sectioned-off areas of the textbook.
 - Read a couple lines before and after these words for more context.
- Understand the difference between text presenting new material and text adding onto it.
 - The latter can be skipped once you understand the concepts. If you still aren't an expert, go back, slow down your pace, and reread the definition or examples.
 - Refer to our [Reading Comprehension Homegrown Handout](#) for additional help.
- Use the THIEVES method.
 - Title, Headings, Introduction, Each paragraph's first sentence, Visuals, End-of-Chapter Questions, Summary
 - The THIEVES method can help you grasp the gist of a large body of text when you're in a time crunch.
 - Review additional reading strategies [here](#).

Reviewing

While you may not need to dedicate as much attention to the conclusion as opposed to other sections because it restates everything, it serves as an extra check for understanding. You can review important points that you may have missed while skimming or find key terms and vocab words listed all in one spot. It's also good to look here if you want to make flashcards so you don't need to flip through every page of the textbook section.

Additional Considerations

Textbook content and its organization can vary between disciplines, so focusing on vocabulary words will generally only prove effective for conceptual courses. For example, in a mathematics-based class, you will learn more by reviewing formulas and working on practice problems. Copying diagrams and charts can also be a concise way to visualize complex models for classes like biology and chemistry.

Activity: Skimming Practice

This sample paragraph below is taken from a microeconomics textbook. Identify the main points to take notes on and create a rough outline.

So far, we have examined short-run trade-offs. In looking at our wings-pizza trade-off, we were essentially living in the moment. But both individuals and society as a whole must weigh the benefits available today (the short run) with those available tomorrow (the long run). In the **short run**, we make decisions that reflect our immediate or short-term wants, needs, or limitations. In the short run, consumers can partially adjust their behavior. In the **long run**, we make decisions that reflect our wants, needs, and limitations over a much longer time horizon. In the long run, consumers have time to fully adjust to market conditions.

Many of life's important decisions are about the long run. We must decide where to live, whether and whom to marry, whether and where to go to college, and what type of career to pursue. Getting these decisions right is far more important than simply deciding how many wings and pizzas to produce. For instance, the decision to save money requires giving up something you want to buy today for the benefit of having more money available in the future. Similarly, if you decide to go to a party tonight, you benefit today, while staying home to study creates a large benefit at exam time. We are constantly making decisions that reflect this tension between today and tomorrow—eating a large piece of cake or a healthy snack, taking a nap or exercising at the gym, buying a jet ski or purchasing stocks in the stock market. Each of these decisions is a trade-off between the present and the future.

~ Dirk Mateer and Lee Coppock, “What is the Trade-Off between Having More Now and Having More Later?,” *Principles of Microeconomics 4th Edition*, 2024.

Analysis for Activity

Answers may vary. Possible strategies are outlined below.

1. **Look at the bolded words.** Without even starting to read, you can tell that the “short run” and “long run” are the main concepts to focus on.
 - a. Read the sentences the terms are in to learn their definitions.
 - b. Read the sentences before and after to get more context for each phrase.
2. **The second paragraph consists of various examples.** Some help visualize the concept of long-run decisions (marriage, college, career), while others compare the short-run and long-run decisions together, illustrating that you will have to sacrifice one to get the other (partying vs. studying, cake vs. snack, nap vs. exercise, jet ski vs. stocks).
 - a. If you understood the short- and long-run concepts from paragraph one, and identified that the next paragraph contained examples, you can skip/not take notes on this section.
3. **Read the first and last sentences of the paragraphs.** Similar to how you preview a chapter, these sentences typically summarize the important points.

Sample Note Outline for Activity

Trade-offs

Short Run = decisions for immediate or short-term wants, needs, or limitations

- ex. benefits available today, “living in the moment”
- can partially adjust behavior

Long Run = decisions for wants, needs, and limitations over a much longer time horizon

- can fully adjust to market conditions
- ex. where to get a career

- Most important decisions = long run
- Decisions = trade-off between present/short run and future/long run

References

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