

How to Learn More Effectively from Reading

Reading is a primary way you will acquire information and develop new knowledge in the course. To learn effectively through reading, two important, complementary processes should occur. One is that you make sense of the material and start to develop an understanding of it, and second you can recall the information from memory. Essentially, you need to use reading strategies that improve your understanding and memory for the material.

What reading strategies work best to improve your understanding of the material? When students don't understand what they are reading, many reread or go back over the material. Rereading material one time does improve learning somewhat, but rereading multiple times does not. A better strategy is to slow down and think about the meaning of the material, try to interpret it in terms of what you already know, elaborate on it by linking it to other ideas, look up the meaning of unfamiliar terminology, and try to explain the material to yourself. All of these are sensemaking activities that help you build understanding. Using any of these strategies will slow you down. It may take longer to read the material than if you simply read the information quickly without thinking about it. But you will understand and remember the information better.

Try self-explaining! Students sometimes reread material because they didn't understand it the first time. Their hope is that a second exposure will improve comprehension. But if new information is unfamiliar and complex a better strategy is to explain it to yourself. Not only will your understanding improve (gradually) but you will become more aware of what you know and what you don't know. You can then focus more attention on comprehension gaps when you study or ask for help. For more information, See [Self-explanation: Student Tip Sheet](#).

What strategies work best to improve your memory of the material? Once again, studies show that rereading material produces little gain in knowledge (Callender & McDaniel, 2009). Students often believe they learn more when they reread because the material becomes more familiar. But being familiar with a concept is not the same as knowing it and being able to recall and use it on exams. This is called an "illusion of knowing;" you think you know something but really you don't. A more effective way to remember material is to practice recalling it, i.e., self-testing. You can do this by reading a section of the material and then trying to recall it, without looking back at the material. Self-testing interrupts the flow of your reading but has a powerful effect on memory. For more information, see [Self-Testing: Student Tip Sheet](#).

By the time you reach college, you have developed reading strategies and habits. Those may work well for you, in which case you may not want to change them. However, if you think your approach to reading is ineffective or could be improved, consider the reading strategy below which combines the processes of comprehension and memory.

Read-Recite-Review-Reflect is a reading strategy that can enhance your understanding and memory of new information (McDaniel, Howard, & Einstein, 2009). The procedure involves four activities:

1. Read – Start by reading a section of your assignment, 1-2 paragraphs, a page or an entire section. You decide.

2. Recite – After you are done reading the section put the material aside and try to recall everything you can remember, by either saying it out loud or writing it down.
3. Review – Review and restudy the material to identify missing information and to better understand it.
4. Reflect – Think about whether you can answer questions about the material you recall. Is it making sense to you? Could you explain it to someone?

How and why the reading strategy supports learning: This approach involves retrieval practice, a particularly effective learning strategy. By trying to recall the material you start to strengthen your memory of it and establish retrieval cues that will help you recall the material again in the future. Naturally, as you try to retrieve the material, there will be gaps in what you remember. Before moving on to the next section of material, you can restudy and review the missing information. A final step is to reflect on how well you think you know the material by asking yourself whether it makes sense and whether you could explain it to someone.

When and why to use the strategy: If you experience difficulty understanding and remembering what you read in a course, it is worth trying out this reading strategy. Studies have found that this approach is more effective than reading and rereading material. Even if you are satisfied with your current reading approach, consider trying the strategy for part of a reading assignment.

How to use the strategy effectively: Recognize that this approach may seem awkward initially. It may seem like it slows you down, and when you can't remember all the material you may start to believe you aren't learning anything. However, it turns out that it doesn't take any more time to engage in this strategy than it does to read and take notes. In addition, studies show that recalling, reviewing, and reflecting result in better comprehension and memory of the subject matter.

This is a different way to read, but it works better than rereading. Not only that but it actually takes no more time than reading and taking notes. This reading approach may seem awkward and more effortful, but with a little practice you will feel more comfortable as you start to see the benefits.

References

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