

Reading Strategies

Dr. Kathleen King

Many ideas in this handout are from a lecture by Dr. Lee Haugen, former Reading Specialist at the ISU Academic Skills Center

For many of you, reading at the college level is an entirely new experience. You've been reading for 12 years or more in school and for pleasure, but academic reading can be overwhelmingly difficult for those whose skills are less than excellent. In K-12 reading, the focus is often on the concrete aspects of the text, the facts, what is easily visible on the page, and writing about reading requires only that you regurgitate basic information.

College reading, on the other hand, requires meta-cognition, the ability to orchestrate your own learning. You need to think about how your learning style interacts with the text you are reading, and perhaps change your reading strategies to meet the challenges of that text.

There are four variables to be considered when learning how to read more successfully: the reader, the text, the strategies, and the goal. Characteristics of the reader include reading skills, interest in the topic, physical factors such as sleepiness or hunger. The text varies in type (novel, science, play, psychology, etc.) and difficulty. Some reading is easy and moves along quickly, while other reading is quite dense and perhaps even tedious, packed with information. The next factor, strategies employed by the reader, makes all the difference. The goal of this handout is to give you a larger repertoire of reading strategies, to help you read less and get more out of it. The final consideration is the purpose. Why are you reading this text, and what do you want to get out of it?

Some students are good readers. Perhaps their parents read to them when they were young, and as adults they read a great deal, read for pleasure, and find reading easy. They instinctively understand how to use reading strategies. For instance, when reading a newspaper, these students have no difficulty scanning the pages quickly, then slowing down to focus on one interesting article.

Others are lazy and inattentive about reading, or feel insecure and easily intimidated by complex material. They have never had to read anything as difficult as their college textbooks and research materials. Such students have not learned to use a variety of reading strategies, but they think of themselves as dumb rather than untrained.

Every time you read, you're teaching yourself how to read. For instance, if you read class materials in bed at night and fall asleep after a few minutes, you're teaching yourself to be uncaring and sleepy when you read.

Academic reading is not easy. Part of learning to use reading strategies is to try out new and different ways of reading. Even professors read, think, write, reread, puzzle over ideas. No one gets it the first time. Successful students learn how to read effectively and remember what they read. You need to learn ways to leap into reading, keep going, finish up, summarize, and connect the new information to other knowledge you have acquired.

Below is a list of reading strategies to try. Keep in mind that any three strategies may be enough to make you a better reader. Experiment with different methods and see what works for you. The goal is to develop a reading system which will help you in the long term, not just for this class, but for life.

Read sitting up, with a good light, at a desk or table.

Keep background noise to a minimum. Loud rock and roll music will not make you a better reader.

The same goes for screaming kids, talking roommates, television or radio. Give yourself a quiet environment so that you can concentrate on the text.

Keep paper and pen within reach.

Before beginning to read, think about the purpose for the reading. Why has the teacher made this assignment? What are you supposed to get out of it? Jot down your thoughts.

Survey the reading. Look at the title of the piece, the subheadings. What is in dark print or stands out? Are there illustrations or graphs?

Read the introduction and conclusion, then go back and read the whole assignment. Or read the first line in every paragraph to get an idea of how the ideas progress, then go back and read from the beginning.

Scan the entire reading, then focus on the most interesting or relevant parts to read in detail.

Pay attention to when you can skim and when you need to understand every word.

Write as you read. Take notes and talk back to the text. Explicate (explain in detail) and mark up the pages. Write down what interests or bores you. Speculate about why.

If you get stuck in the reading, think and write about where you got stuck. Contemplate why that particular place was difficult and how you might break through the block.

Record and explore your confusion. Confusion is important because it's the first stage in understanding.

When the going gets difficult, and you don't understand the reading, slow down and reread sections.

Break long assignments into segments. Read 10 pages, then do something else. Later, read the next 10 pages and so on.

Read prefaces and summaries to learn important details about the book. Look at the table of contents for information about the structure and movement of ideas. Use the index to look up specific names, places, ideas.

Translate difficult material into your own words. Create an alternative text.

Answer the questions at the end of the chapter.

Answer these question in your own words: What's the author talking about? What does the author want me to get out of this?

Read the entire piece, then write a one paragraph or one sentence summary.

Transcribe your notes in the book or handwritten notes into more formal notes on the computer. Turn your first notes into a list of ideas or a short essay.

Review the ideas in the text after you finish reading. Ask yourself questions to determine what you got out of the reading.

Mark up the text, bring it to class, and ask questions about what you don't understand.

Post an email to the class Mailing List and ask for responses from the teacher and fellow students.

Consult another source. What does another author have to say on the same topic?

Disagree with the author. Become a devil's advocate. Remember, you don't have to believe an idea to argue about it.

Think about the text in three ways. 1. Consider the text itself, the basic information right there on the page. (This is the level of most high school readers and many college students.) 2. Next think about what is between the lines, the conclusions and inferences the author means you to draw from the text. 3. Finally, go beyond

thinking about the text. What creative, new, and different thoughts occur as you combine your knowledge and experiences with the ideas in the reading?

Call the Academic Skills Center at ISU (236-3662) and make an appointment for tutoring in reading.