

Most Important Skill In College

The MISC (Most Important Skill in College) you'll learn is:

the ability to take in (read) information, process (think about) it, and then explain it to someone else. All of which depends on your ability to read college level material.

What's the big deal about college reading?

- In high school, you were (kind of) expected to do reading for class, but teachers often covered the book's material during class time, so it didn't always matter.
- In college, you are expected to take an active role in your learning process, which means you have to (1) do the reading before class, (2) understand—or at least have questions about—the content, and (3) take an active role discussing what you've read.

So you think you know how to read.....

Think again. Reading college material for content is different from any other kind of reading you've ever done before. It's often theoretical—about ideas rather than things—and can sometimes feel like you're reading a foreign language.

- The good news: you aren't alone in not knowing how to do this.
- The bad news: you're going to have to learn how to do this.
- The good news after the bad: once you've learned how to read effectively, classes will be easier to understand, more interesting, and your grades will improve.

STEPS TO EFFECTIVE READING

Read when you're most awake and alert.

Duh. This seems simple, but many of us start reading right before you go to bed? Don't wait until you're tired. College material is dense and you're expected to remember and learn from it. Are you a morning person? Do it then. Most awake right after lunch? Do it then. Get the picture?

Set aside time to read.

How many of you say “Oh it’s just the reading for the course. I’ll catch up before the test.” Don’t fall into this trap—if you do, you’re seriously screwed. You can’t cram understanding! Your mind is an easy thing to trick—if you think of your reading as homework that you have to hand in on the day it’s listed on your syllabus, then that’s how you’ll start to treat it. Do the reading before it’s due.

Pre-read.

Huh? What’s pre-reading? Only the most important part of reading college material! It’s a series of steps listed on the next page—and while it will seem like a little more work at first, you will make up the time because the reading will go faster, you’ll understand it better, and you’ll cut down on your studying time later.

Take notes!

Newsflash: Highlighting a section of your book does not transfer it immediately into your brain—in fact, it can work against you. Take notes in your own words. Why? There’s a proven connection between reading, writing and memory—and if you can put it in your own words that means you really understand it. (If you can’t, you don’t.)

Read ONLY.

Don’t do anything else but read. Turn off your cell phone. Don’t eat. If you read better with background noise, then turn the radio to music or talk or whatever won’t make you want to listen.

Take breaks.

Yup, you heard me. Take a break. College reading is incredibly dense, so break it up for yourself. Tell yourself you’ll read five paragraphs, or for 15 minutes, and then take a 3-minute break. Use an egg timer and turn off your cell phone.

Talk about it.

Get together—over coffee, a snack, a beer—with people in your class for the express purpose of talking through the reading. It’s a great excuse to get together or get to know someone better—just be sure to stay on topic.

PRE-READING STEPS:

Books—fiction or non-fiction:

- Write down these questions: What's the book/chapter/section about? Why did the author write the book—what point was s/he trying to make? Why has your professor asked you to read this—and how does it relate to the class material?
- Now, read the title, table of contents, the forward, the introduction and the “about the author” bit at the end. Do your best to answer the questions.

Why do this? Because that's what the whole book will be about, and guessing at it in advance will make the whole thing make more sense. It gives you a “framework” on which to hang the information you'll be getting from the book.

- Now read the book, taking notes as you go along, using the steps below to help you do so.

Non-Fiction—chapters/essays/articles:

- Read the title, section headings (often in larger bold type), subsection headings (perhaps in italics or in smaller bold type). Look at charts, graphs, pictures and read the captions. Find any bold or italicized words and read the sentence—and if you can't figure out the meaning, look it up before you start to read. (Some books have a handy glossary just for this!)
- If your material doesn't have all this helpful information, then read the first paragraph, the first sentence of each paragraph after it and the entire concluding paragraph.

Why do this? This will help you get a grip on where the author is heading or what point they're going to make during the chapter. Once you know that, the information in the chapter will make more sense and feel like it's falling into place.

- Now read the required material, taking notes as you go along. Do not quote the author—write down the main idea of each paragraph in your own words. You may notice that there are main ideas and supporting ideas—so try to figure out what goes where and see if you can set your notes up as an outline of the chapter/article/essay with headings, subheadings, and supporting information.

Fiction—books or short stories:

- Once you do part one, then just read the story. As you're reading, take note of anything that repeats—a character, a setting, a set of actions, a symbol, a section of dialogue, a style of writing, whatever. Note it down.
- Re-read the story, paying more attention to the sections that you noted earlier. Think of the things you noted in your first reading as clues—what do they tell you?

Why do this? Fiction is often about more than just the plot (what happens in the story)—there's often a deeper meaning that the author is trying to get across. The "clues" you noted will often point to that deeper meaning. Any time you have any kind of insight to the deeper meaning, write down what you think it is and why.

Remember:

Don't blow off your reading because it's hard. This is just like anything else you've had to learn—how to play a sport, an instrument, even how to use your cell phone—you have to practice! Do the steps above to help, but keep going even if you don't understand it. Then ASK THE PROFESSOR, either in class or during their office hours. (Using the steps above will help you ask smart questions!)

Asking the professor tells them three things: (1) You're smart enough to ask for help, (2) you're doing the reading, and (3) you're working hard to understand it. Professors are generally happy to help you, either through discussing the material or pointing you in the direction of other helpful information. Also, professors often remember your hard work come grading time, and it may make a difference.