Strategies for Reading Textbooks

Reading for a US college class may be quite different than reading for classes in your home country.

While some professors may require that you are responsible for every page of every chapter in a textbook, most professors are more selective about what they want their students to read. Many professors will explain their expectations about the assigned reading during the first few days of class and in their syllabus. However, if you are uncertain about their expectations, make an appointment to see your professor. Asking a professor about how to handle reading assignments would be a perfect way to introduce yourself and to establish a positive working relationship for the semester.

Order your textbooks prior to the semester, if you can, so that you can familiarize yourself with the content and writing style. Textbooks purchased in the US can be expensive, so plan your budget accordingly. Order your textbooks in English. While reading in your native language may be less challenging and time consuming, you are not helping yourself to become more proficient in English or to learn the material in English. You can also work with a content tutor and a Spoken English Tutor to help you master the pronunciation and meaning of key terms as well as important concepts in your reading. However, you are responsible for reading the material prior to meeting with these tutors.

- Set your purpose for reading by checking objectives for your course and any current assignments as well as any chapter objectives.
- Gain an overview of the chapter by reading the chapter summary first.
- Create a chapter outline by reviewing the detailed table of contents for the textbook.
- Schedule time to read an entire section of a chapter if possible.
- Use what you know about paragraph structure to hunt down the main ideas. Most textbook writers use a direct approach of beginning each paragraph with a topic sentence. You also want to pay attention to supportive details that help you remember the main ideas.
- Use underlining and annotation to stay actively involved in the material while you’re reading.
- Decide whether to take notes while reading a paragraph, at the end of each paragraph, or at the end of a section. Your decision may be based on your comfort with the material.
- Review your notes after completing each chapter section and after reading the entire chapter. Tab any chapter sections that contain graphs or charts that you may wish to review later as you prepare for exams.
- Continue to relate your reading to class discussions.