

How to Remember What You Read

Many academic disciplines require students to read vast amounts of dense scholarly material in addition to keeping up with lecture notes. Just reading the required number of pages can seem next to impossible, much less remembering what you have read. Here are some proven strategies that can help you organize and remember the information.

Focus on Main Points

The first or second paragraph following a heading often contains a summary of the main points, but check other paragraphs as well. Take note of overt statements of the author's intent, such as, "My aim is" Try to notice the author's style. Are important points mentioned more often at the beginning, middle, or end of paragraphs?

Put it in Your Own Words

Explain the ideas in your own words, either by saying them out loud or writing them down. If you can't do it, you probably don't yet understand the material. Make separate summary notes for an easy overview, and then test yourself after each paragraph, section and chapter.

Make Full Use of Your Textbook

Don't be afraid to write in your books—you paid for them! Write in pencil/erasable pen and use coloured tabs to highlight if you need to resell the books after the class is over.

First Read, then Underline and/or Highlight

Reading a section first will help you see key ideas and avoid underlining too much. Using different colours and symbols (in moderation!) helps categorize types of information such as definitions, important people and new concepts.

Write in the Margins

Be brief, but clear. You can jot down examples that will remind you of key ideas or your own thoughts about and reactions to the text.

Use Sticky Tabs

For future reference, bookmark important sections and ideas, labeling your tabs with key words so you won't waste time trying to find those ideas later. You may also want to make notes about where to find related ideas, for example, "definition on p. 20."

Read Headings

Pay attention to headings and sub-headings, which are usually clear summaries of the section. Sometimes using these headings can also be helpful in organizing your notes.

Notice Text Layout

Notice bold and italicized words, which often signify key terms or definitions. Diagrams and other visuals can also represent important concepts. Read captions!

View Chapters Holistically

Recognizing the relationship of ideas within and between each chapter will help build a more complete understanding of the material. Are the ideas organized chronologically, by cause and effect, or in some other logical sequence?

Get Personal

If possible, connect with the material on a personal level. Some topics can elicit responses or trigger memories which can help make the material stay in your memory. The more invested you are in the material, the better your chances of retaining it.

Draw It Out

Increase your interaction with the text by turning words into diagrams and diagrams into words. Processing the information in a new, creative context can help to make reading more engaging and more effectively store the information in your brain. Diagrams or doodles in your notes also draw your eye to specific places on the page, saving time when you're skimming to find a certain point.

Accentuate the Positive

Stay open to and positive about the text. Getting frustrated or negative will only make understanding more difficult. Take a break or switch to another subject.

Be Flexible

Choose notetaking strategies that suit not only your own learning style but also the requirements of the subject. For example, you will need to take a different approach for a language or math course than you use for history or psychology. Let the format of the textbook suggest a useful approach.

Review What You Read. . .

- Immediately after you read it
- Within a few days
- Before the test

Remember that reviewing is not just skimming through the chapter, but recalling key ideas from memory. Read a heading, and then ask yourself what subheadings and important concepts are contained within BEFORE looking them up.

Anticipate the Test/Exam

Anticipate, formulate and answer your own test questions based on your review and on what your professor has emphasized in class.

References

Edwards, B. (1999). *The new drawing on the right side of the brain*. Tarcher/Putnam.

Fleet, J., Goodchild, F., & Zajchowski, R. (1999). *Learning for success: Effective strategies for students* (3rd ed.). Nelson Thomson.