Reading Textbooks Using SQ3R

Textbooks are hard to read. They contain a great deal of information presented in dense format. They are not particularly reader-friendly. However, they are the source of much of the information we need to learn.

What do we do?

SQ3R is a study strategy that was developed specifically to help students read and study textbooks. Students forget as much as 80% of what they read in textbooks if they don’t know effective strategies to use. However, when they use SQ3R, they retain as much as 80% of the content.

SQ3R stands for ‘Survey’ ‘Question’ ‘Read’ ‘Recite’ ‘Review’. It works because it guides the thinking processes that are necessary for comprehending and remembering what students read.

How do we do it?

Follow a reading process. First, pre-read...

Survey: Look at headings, sub-headings, diagrams, charts, captions, italicized text and sidebars. You may also read the introduction and conclusion. Give some thought to the topic that is being covered and the way the materials are organized. This will help you organize your thinking as you read it. As you survey a chapter, formulate questions about it.
Questions: What do you already know about the topic? What do you think the text will say? How much depth does the text go into? What does this/that heading or sub-heading mean? Have I seen any of this vocabulary in other contexts? Use the words in the title, headings and sub-headings to formulate questions. When you read, you will have the purpose of answering these questions. (Remember that elements of critical thinking include assumptions, purpose, and questions.) Are there review questions at the end of the chapter? Check these out to give you some insights about what to expect when you read.

Survey and question are pre-reading strategies. They help you by getting you focused and thinking about the topic. If you read with a purpose and some expectations in mind, your attention and comprehension will be better.

Read: to answer your questions and to get as much information from the author as you can. As you read, make margin notes, underline or check key points. Pay attention to passages that answered your questions, that re-stated something that came up in class, or that you think the instructor will ask about on a test. Stop at the end of each page or section and retell what you read. If you can’t retell a fair portion of what you just read, go back and re-read it. The purpose of reading is to get information, not just sit with your face in a book.

Recite: re-tell what you’ve read. Many people do this by making notes, but others find that it helps them to learn it if they put it into a new format such as a flow chart, time line or mind map. You may wish to make flash cards or even a wall poster. If you find it helpful to ‘hear’ information, discuss the content with a study buddy. Make up test questions. As you recite, think about what the key concepts, main and supporting ideas, and examples are? Invest some time and effort into reciting — for many people, this is where learning happens.

Review: remember that we all learn by repetition. If you have done a good job reading and reciting, you understand the text and have a good set of notes. This is what you use to review. Spend 15—30 minutes every few days reviewing what you’ve learned. Use your notes to quiz yourself, and go back over anything that you don’t remember. It’s not necessary to spend a lot of time reviewing, but review frequently.