



# Students Guide to Online Course Success

## Read Right

Synonyms for *reading* are *understanding, comprehending, studying, explaining, analyzing, and deciphering.*

Reading, like other learning strategies, is a behavior that requires your active participation. Reading without understanding means you will not remember the facts and concepts you need for the tests and course. Understanding the structure of a chapter in your textbook or of an online article provides a framework to which you can relate individual facts or concepts. The best readers don't try to memorize everything; they try to understand everything.

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## What type of learner are you?

**The best learning situation for you is the one that best fits your learning style.**

- Are you able to establish a study schedule for yourself and follow it?
- Can you learn well from reading on your own?
- Do you organize your learning materials for the courses you take?

- Do you like to write?
- Do you prefer to study by yourself rather than with a group?
- Are you a problem solver?

If you answered "yes" to ALL of the above questions, you have the attitude and strategies needed to be successful in an online course. Read on for further hints for success.

## Take a Time Out

Because you will be learning from your home, you must prioritize your time. Many time demands and distractions exist within your home environment. Set up your computer in a room where you can close the door on your home life. Make certain your work area is comfortable with space enough to write and to store the materials needed for the course.

Establish a schedule with specific times you plan to work on the course each week. Say to yourself, "I will work on my online

course each Monday from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., each Wednesday from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. and Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to Noon." *Don't* say, "I will spend nine hours per week working on my on-line course." If your course has "live chat" or posting requirements, include a specific time for those tasks in your study schedule as well. Be prepared to devote more time to an online course than to a traditional, classroom course.

The key to success is to establish successful habits. Study at the same

time and the same place each week to establish a habit or pattern for your brain. When you sit down in that familiar place at that familiar time, your brain says, "Hmmm, this is where and when I do my studying. I'd better get to work." Remember, four weeks of diligent practice is needed to establish a habit.



**Make certain your work area is comfortable with space enough to write and to store the materials needed for the courses**

# Read Right: Continued

A reading strategy known as **SQ4R** helps you-

- Warm up your brain for in-depth reading
- Identify the important facts and concepts
- Understand how the information is related together
- Retain the information in your memory

## **S stands for Survey**

The goal of surveying is to "warm up" the brain, to discover the main point of the reading material, and to identify the relationship between the parts and subtopics. Psychologists experimenting with rats running a maze found that learning was more efficient when the rats could see the whole maze before starting. Print out the article you wish to read on the computer or open your textbook and begin surveying.

- Think about the title and what might be included in the chapter.
- Read the introduction
- Read the main headings and subheadings.
- Look over charts, tables, pictures, and graphics
- Read the chapter summary.

If you find your mind wandering during this step, read aloud. Also, try standing up and slowly walking around the room as you read. Surveying should reduce your study time because-

- You should concentrate better. You now know what to look for as you are reading.

- The main points stand out more. You will know the author's organization in advance.
- Details will fall into place and be easier to remember. You have an organizational framework on which to place facts.

## **Q means Question**

Questioning gives purpose to reading. Reading becomes an active search for information. Concentration and focus improve.

- Turn headings and subheadings into questions. Ask *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* about the headings.
- If headings are missing, look for topic sentences (often the first or last sentence of the paragraph) and turn them into questions.
- Make chapter objectives into questions.
- Use the authors' questions at the beginning or end of the chapter.
- Use a workbook or study guide for questions.

Having a question in mind results in -

- Improved concentration since you are reading with a specific purpose in mind
- Reading for meaning
- A way to decide which details are important and which are not

## **R #1 means Read**

Read the paragraphs under a particular heading so that you are reading a small amount at a time.

Stop when you are finished with that section.

- Read to answer the question.
- Move quickly.
- Sort out ideas and evaluate them.

Two important purposes in reading textbook and articles are --

- To get the main ideas of a paragraph, a section, and a whole chapter.
- To locate important details which support the main ideas.

## **R #2 indicates Recite**

Have you ever tutored someone? If so, you know that the more often you explain a concept to another person, the clearer that concept becomes to you and the longer you remember it. Reciting guarantees memory, for the more senses you use in learning, the better you will remember the information. For most courses, 50% of your study time should be spent reciting. Follow this technique for effective learning through recitation:

- **Aloud**, try to answer the questions you generated from the headings. First, try to answer the questions in your own words; next, try to answer with the language of the text
- **Aloud**, state from memory the main points of the section you just read.
- Take time after each section to recite. All reciting should not be left until the comple-

## Read Right: Continued

tion of the whole chapter.

The benefits of reciting are -

- You remember more
- You need to reread less.
- You can't fool yourself about what information you have learned and that which you do not know.

### ***R #3* signifies *Rephrase* or *"Rite"***

Notice that this step may seem out of place according to the way in which many students study. Do you take notes or underline while you are reading? If you do so, try the SQ4R method of highlighting after you read and recite. Why is this sequence better for learning? If you highlight or take notes as you read, most of the sentences you read seem to contain important information. You don't have the overall picture of that section, so it's easy to confuse unimportant details with the important information. You may end up with too much of the section highlighted or too many notes. Remember, the purpose of highlighting, marking your text, or taking notes is to condense the material for review purposes. When you review for a test, you do not want to read the chapters again in order to select the important information for study. In order to accomplish the R #3 step successfully, perform one or more of the following strategies. Your individual learning style will make some of the strategies more appealing to you than others.

- Underline or highlight key words or phrases, not

whole sentences

- Summarize key points in your own words on the margin of the page.
- Draw a single line in the margin next to a main point and a double line next to an important detail.
- On paper, write questions from the chapter and then the answers using only key words, listings, etc. that are needed to recall the whole idea.
- Outline the chapter or sections of the chapter. This method forces attention to the structure of the material.
- Develop summary notes if each text chapter does not include a summary.

### ***R #4* stands for *Review***

Without review, most students forget 80% of what they read in just two weeks. Your goal as an efficient student is to use review to move information from your short term into your long term memory. Review two or three times each week by answering the questions that you formulated from headings. Cover your text and try to recite the main points you highlighted in each section. Do the same with the notes you may have written. In addition to formulating detailed questions for learning specific facts, write a short paragraph stating only the main ideas of the entire chapter. These ideas may form the basis of essay-type questions. Remember, if you can't say it, you don't know it. Work with your brain. You will perform better if you review frequently in shorter periods rather than trying to learn everything at once.

## How Do you Behave?

Always keep in mind that learning is a behavior, a series of actions. What you do and how you do it determines how successful you will be as a learner. As in any other learning situation, the successful online student should:

- Assess the learning environment. How important are the various factors in this environment: reading textbooks, participating in online discussions, thinking about and evaluating concepts and ideas, making notes, remembering specific facts, and testing?
- Evaluate the learning tools and techniques you usually use. Are they appropriate for this learning environment? Do you need to incorporate new strategies that you never or rarely use? Would you be more successful if you modified some of the ways you study for this course?
- Practice the learning strategies appropriate to this environment until they become habits. Use self-discipline to promote the development of good study habits. Studying well now is more effective and less stressful than postponing study until deadlines are near.



**Use self-discipline to promote the development of good study habits.**

## Why Organize?

Being organized is especially important in an online course. Your instructor in the virtual classroom may provide you with your syllabus and all assignment explanations online, or s/he may mail some of the course requirements to you while providing the others online. Every online course varies, but the need for organizing your materials remains the same.

You should use a 3-ring notebook with dividers on which you can write labels. Divide your notebook into sections that will work for your particular course. Here are some suggestions for the sections in your notebook.

- A section with a copy of your syllabus, a calendar for the time period of the course, and weekly time management sheets.
- A section for technical notes which will contain any computer “how to” information you collect and use as the course progresses.
- A section for notes you have taken from the texts, from online articles, and from other students’ on-line comments.
- A section for assignments. You may wish to print out directions for your assignments for easy reference and for planning your time sched-

ule for the course.

- A section for completed work. Always keep a print copy of the materials you turn in to your instructor, whether you returned the assignment by mail, fax, or online.

Now that you are organized, you can use each study session to its maximum. You can easily access the reference information you need from your notebook and utilize it with the information on the computer for an efficient, meaningful study session.

## Alone or Together?

You have a way you prefer to learn that is part of your personality. Changing your learning preference is possible but difficult. The best learning situation for you is the one that matches your learning style. Do you prefer to learn by yourself or to learn as a member of a group? Online learning can work for either preference, but you must know yourself and use the learning elements in the course that match your style.

**Learning by yourself** is a style that is well-suited to most online courses. Much of the course work must be carried out by you with little assistance from anyone. Most of your work will take place in a home

setting where you are sitting by yourself in front of the computer or the textbooks. One potential course requirement you may dislike most is the assignment to participate in live chat discussions. You may feel that since the real learning is occurring during your solitary work, the discussion requirement is busy work non-essential to the course. Sharing your ideas helps firm and shape them in your own mind. Try to view the group requirements as a process for further developing your individual learning.

**Learning in a group** is not the dominant learning mode for online courses. You can,

however, use certain characteristics of online courses to mold the course to your preferred learning style. Near the beginning of the course, many instructors ask students to introduce themselves online. While talking about yourself, mention that you are looking for other students in the class who are interested in forming an online study/support group. Correspond by e-mail or chat with those students on a regular basis, sharing thoughts about the course and helping them and you stick to a study schedule. If you wish and if it is geographically possible, you may wish to organize an in-person review session prior to an exam.

# Write, Write, Write

Writing is the major means of communication for online course students. Several types of writing are required. One type is the academic writing in which all college students participate: **essay writing**. This type of writing takes careful planning, often some research, and the writing of several drafts before the final copy is submitted. The computer is a tool which makes writing revisions quicker and easier than ever before. However, remember that the human brain has not changed the way it prefers to process information.

- More than one rough draft must be written. Revisions improve the understanding of the reader as you, the writer, make your thoughts more clear and detailed with each draft. Allow several hours, or, preferably, a day, between drafts. Your eyes then will read your draft with a fresh perspective and without the self-affirming familiarity present during the earlier writing process.
- Organize your writing with a specific thesis followed by supporting detail and examples. Picture a large group of storage shelves with all types of objects scattered at random on the shelves. How easy is it for you to find a particular object on those shelves? Now picture storage shelves with labeled bins, each bin containing

related objects.

- You easily can determine where you should look for a particular item. Organization in writing is like using labeled bins. As you write, you provide the labels for each bin or supporting idea, then proceed to open that bin to display all the individual evidence, details and examples inside. The reader can easily understand your progression of ideas rather than wandering around lost in an essay full of scattered thoughts.



*Write down your ideas on paper before you participate in a chat session for your online class.*

**E-mail** is another type of writing you will use in your on-line course. With e-mail, you still have the opportunity to revise your communication before you send it. You can check the spelling and grammar although with some e-mail programs you may have to do so individually unless you are importing a Word document. When e-mailing your instructor, try to avoid grammatical errors and communicate as clearly as possible.

**Chat room or message board** communications also are types of writing you may be required to

produce in your online course. The instructor may require you to post comments or participate in online discussions regarding certain course content each week. This type of writing requires some thought before participation. If you are given content guidelines or questions before the discussion, write down some ideas on paper to have near your computer as you participate. Add details from your reading to those ideas. If you are not given guidelines, then use the techniques from the review portion of the SQ4R reading and study process discussed earlier before you participate online.

## What's the Problem

Use the resources available to you to solve any technological or course content problems that arise. Communicate with the appropriate staff immediately. Find out the names of the technological support staff that are available to help you with the online course. Don't be hesitant about contacting them. Also, let your instructor know when you are experiencing problems. Send an e-mail to her or him immediately. Keep persisting until you get the answers you need to resolve your situation. You must be willing to address your problem situations quickly, persistently, and with all the resources available to you.