LEARNING YOUR TEXTBOOK MATERIAL

I. Survey & Summary

Before getting down to serious study, the use of survey and summary will set the stage, or they can provide a minimum quick-time attack on an assigned chapter.

Psychologists experimenting with rats running a maze have found that learning is more efficient when the rats can see the whole maze before starting. In reading, not only does skimming each page as the first step establish an overview of the problem, but it usually elicits some flicker of interest where there has been none before. A variation of skimming, that takes a little longer and works well with some books, involves reading the first sentence of every paragraph.

One difference between studying hard and studying smart is illustrated with the story of two students, one of whom did not know how to use the summary and questions in the text to do a limited preparation in a limited time. Plowing through a study assignment from Page 1 is an approach that wastes time and energy. It does not help with recognizing the relative importance of the various pieces of information presented.

II. Good comprehension: Questioning

Common problems that interfere with comprehension are boredom, mind wandering, and students seeing little benefit for the effort and time they put in. Since lack of involvement with the material is a prime reason for lack of comprehension, the technique of questioning can be shown to generate interest where no interest existed before. The good student is an aggressive questioner, and skill in asking questions can be developed.

The mind absorbs and remembers material for which it has been primed with questions before reading, as compared to recall when questions are given after reading.

Three kinds of questions should be used consistently:
(1) General questions generated in previewing and skimming an assignment.
(2) Sets of questions provided by the author, to be read before reading the chapter.
(3) Specific questions the reader formulates as he or she reads along, usually based on section headings. The questioning reader is an active reader, and the interested reader is the one who learns and remembers.
Reading to answer specific questions may increase your reading rate. You can practice by turning headings into questions and in reading rapidly to answer questions.

The most basic question that students should ask themselves is why they are reading this textbook. It is not enough just to say that the teacher assigned it. A student’s honest recognition of his or her own motives, from the many possible reasons for study, will help focus his or her efforts appropriately.

III. Recall: Learning and Remembering

People often read expecting to forget what they read. Forgetting is the natural thing; remembering is unnatural, especially with textbook material. One basic secret of effective memory is the intention to remember.

The proper approach to remembering is to learn a little and to make it stick before going on. For effective textbook study, everything that a student really wants to learn and remember should be written down. Note-taking requires thought, work, and time; it forces involvement and focuses attention.

For efficient note-taking, first notes should be brief and contain only what needs to be learned; abbreviations and a skinny outline form are appropriate. Second, notes should be written from memory without looking at the book in order to get short-term memory underway. Third, the student’s own words should be used as much as possible.

To move material from the short-term to the long-term memory, review and repetition are basic. Immediate review of notes even before the chapter is finished combats forgetting. New notes should be reviewed several times right away, with covered notes and attempts to recall. Old notes should be reviewed at least weekly. Each review takes less time and results in less forgetting. Over-learning is the goals so that even under the stress of a test the learning will be remembered. It is also useful to recite out loud.

Everyone feels that they forget most of what they’ve learned in courses at school unless they work with the learning daily, but none of this learning is really wasted. The buried knowledge remains below the conscious level, becoming a base for more advanced learning. There is a belief that no learning is entirely forgotten.