Clues to What’s Important

How can a student decide what is important and what is not? There are two main sources of clues: those in the textbook itself and those outside of the book.

In the textbook:

Not all books will have all of these, but all textbooks should have some of these features:

- Topics listed in the Table of Contents or in an Abstract at the beginning of the chapter or article.
- Chapter, section, and paragraph titles or headings (usually given in boldface type.)
- Topic sentences. Well-written paragraphs have a topic sentence (often, but not always, the first sentence) which states the central idea of the paragraph.
- Numbered or lettered lists (for example: “There are three types of cells; one type is…”)
- Italicized terms or concepts.
- All types of classifications (for example: “There are several different approaches to the study of man: the Freudian, the Behavioristic, and the Humanistic…”)
- Lists the causes and/or effects of a phenomenon.
- Specific theories associated with an individual whose name is mentioned (for example: “Adler’s theory of personality revolves around the concept of striving for superiority…”)
- New concepts, that is, concepts not encountered before which are introduced, defined, or explained.
- Specific discoveries or research findings.
- Graphs, tables, charts, and diagrams.
- Formulas, especially in the physical sciences like math, chemistry, or physics.
- Topics to which a large amount of space is devoted.
- General conclusions reached about some topic.
- Concepts which are needed to solve problems, to complete exercises, or to discuss topics given at the end of a chapter.
- Terms and definitions listed in the index or in the glossary at the end of the chapter or the book.

**Other:** Learn what the course is about by the title and the description that is provided in the college catalogue or course outline.

**Clues from the instructor:**

1. Listen for specific statements made by the course instructor regarding what he or she expects the students to learn.

2. Ask a direct question to the instructor regarding what he or she expects students to know.

3. Arrange an individual conference with the instructor

4. Look over past examinations given by the same instructor, if they are available. Or talk to students who have already taken the course.

5. Use graded current exams from the course as a basis for studying. Get an idea of the type of questions the instructor likes to ask.

6. Study handouts from the instructor concerning course themes and concepts.

Adapted from: *A Guide to Effective Study*. Written by Edwin A. Locke