

SQ4R: A Classic Method for Studying Texts

Introduction

We call this method a classic because students have found it useful since the early 60's. It's probably worth your time to try all the steps at first, and then choose and apply only those that work effectively for each of your course texts. Although using the SQ4R method may seem time consuming at first, once you know the steps the process takes only a few minutes. (For a more comprehensive look at many aspects of reading from textbooks, including improving your concentration and dealing with difficult textbooks, consult our Study Skills Tip Sheet.)

S = Survey

Before you crack open your book to page one and dive in, take a few minutes to read the preface and introduction to the text, and browse through the table of contents and the index. This will tell you the main topics that the book will cover, the author's particular approach to the subject (i.e., why he/she wrote another text on the subject when there are probably twenty on the market), and what the basic organizational structure will be.

A similar process is repeated before each chapter. Read all the titles and subtitles, study any pictures, charts or graphs, and, if there are any, read the summary at the end of the chapter and any study questions. Surveying a chapter in this way gives you the "big picture," a framework of the main ideas which will help to hold the details together later.

Q = Question

Before beginning to read, take the subtitle of the section (or the first sentence of a paragraph) and turn it into a question. For example, if you're reading part of a chapter called "Functions of the Spinal Cord," ask yourself, "What are the functions of the spinal cord?"

R#1 = Read

You then read, not passively sliding your eyes over the words, but actively engaging the text, trying to find the answer to your question. Be cautious,

however, that you don't end up skimming for the answer to your question and missing other important information.

R#2 = Respond

Once you've read the section, close the textbook and answer your question, either orally or on paper, *in your own words*. If you can't answer the question, you should reread that section until you can. If, after several tries, you still can't answer your question, go on to the next few sections and see if things become clearer. You may find that you need to change your question. For example, you may have first posed the question, "What is the Treaty of Versailles?" for the subtitle "The Treaty of Versailles," but, after reading the section, you may find that a better question is, "Why was the Treaty of Versailles created?" If changing your question doesn't help clarify the reading, it's time to get some help. Your instructor or the Counselling Department can help with effective reading strategies.

R#3 = Record

Once you've understood the material and can summarize it in your own words, the next step is to record the information in some way. Some common methods are to highlight and/or mark the text, or take notes, or some combination of both. Whichever method or combination of methods you choose (some pros and cons are summarized next), it's critical to remember to read and understand the material first, and then go back and record.

Highlighting

The Pros:

- takes less time than note taking
- charts and graphs from text readily available

The Cons:

- very easy to do badly; can fool you into thinking you're learning material when what you're really doing is colouring

- tendency to mark too much to avoid missing something important; experts say highlight 10 - 15%; students usually highlight 70 - 80%
- because fragments of sentences are highlighted, tendency is to read whole sentence for complete meaning and so most of the book ends up being re-read
- necessary to study for tests from heavy, clumsy textbook
- difficult to integrate with lecture notes
- textbook ends up looking very used and reduces resale value

Notetaking

The Pros:

- because it's time consuming, encourages you to be concise and more selective of important information
- information is in point form but still grammatically complete
- provides a portable, easy-to-manage study tool - text not often needed for studying
- condensed study notes can be made in margins as you go, saving time when preparing for exams
- easy to integrate text and lecture notes if done on loose-leaf paper

The Cons:

- time-consuming
- tendency to copy text rather than take notes in your own words

R#4 = Review

In courses where there is a lot of factual material to remember, a regular review period (usually once a week) can be a very effective strategy for retaining information. Integrating a weekly review period into your study routine will help you remember more of the information longer, thereby changing the nature of the studying done at exam time. Rather than relearning material that has been forgotten because you haven't looked at it since reading it or writing it down, preparing for an exam can include a review of familiar material and rehearsal strategies like trying old exams.

The secret to making regular review periods effective is to start from the beginning of the course in each

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review session. The volume of material to review increases as the semester progresses, but the amount of time needed to review older material decreases. After you've reviewed the first week's material a few times, it will take only minutes to skim over it and recall the key points.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department and the Academic Success Centre are your best sources for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford - 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack - 604-795-2808 (A 1318) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Collaborative Group Work
Concentration
Learning from Lectures
Learning from Texts
Managing Nervousness During Oral Presentations
Reading and the Web

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