

Critical Reading

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Student
Academic
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Center

Undergraduate and graduate students at the University of New England are assigned to read several types of texts—textbooks, fiction, collections of essays, PowerPoint summaries of class lectures, and scientific journal articles. For most students, the number one reading challenge in college is managing the large amount of reading assigned, while understanding and remembering content. Critical Reading encourages the discovery of information and ideas within a text and involves careful, active, reflective, and analytical thinking and processing. Reading to learn what a textbook is teaching may suffice when the goal is to learn specific factual information. Often we read with other purposes. Students need to solve problems and make meaningful connections. Critical thinking allows us to monitor our understanding as we read.

The basic reading strategy for most texts is the same:

- **preview** the material to get an overview of the contents,
- **read** the material using strategies for comprehension, and finally,
- **review** the content before you move on to other assignments.

Frequent review of fact-based texts throughout the semester is essential for retention of information.

We recommend the **PQ4R** reading method: **Preview, Question, Read, Reflect, Recite, and Review** (also known as the **SQ3R** method, **Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review**).

Preview assigned reading before each class. Read chapter objectives and lists of key terms at the beginning of chapters, and then skim the chapter reading headings in bold type. Read chapter summaries at the end.

Next, study the assigned text, a section at a time. Review the bold heading, then formulate a study **Question** which is answered by the heading or topic of the section, and write it in the margin. This question focuses your thinking on the main idea and is a valuable study tool for review.

Read the section, mentally find an answer to the question you wrote.

Reflect on your reading, try to connect it to something in your experience.

Next, return to your study question, and try to **Recite** an answer to it, using the information you just read. Check the text if you have forgotten details and relearn. Now you are ready to move on to the next section and repeat the process.

Review at the end of your study session for the day, by answering study questions at the end of the chapter, making flash cards, and revisiting and answering the **Questions** you wrote in the margins.

Adapting PQ4R to PowerPoint handouts

Some instructors format their PowerPoint documents like textbooks, with topical headings, some do not. You should download and print the PowerPoint documents before class and skim them to form an outline of the upcoming lecture in your mind.

During class take notes on the notes lines next to the slides. After class, process the PowerPoint printouts by reviewing your notes to fill in missing details. Next, divide the slides into topical sections and write a study question for each section, in the margin. Read and reflect on each section, then recite the information using the questions you wrote. Review the entire document after you have read each section, using the study questions to test yourself. Add key terms to your flashcard collection.

Adapting PQ4R to anthologies, essays, or fiction

With reading that has longer chapters and is not as fact-dense as textbooks, you can adapt the PQ4R method to help you keep track of trends or themes in the reading as well as details. Be familiar with the class syllabus and assignments for presentations or papers at the beginning of the semester, so you are reading with a purpose from day one.

Skim the chapter or article you will be reading during your study session. Try to break the chapter down into topical sections and write yourself a study question for the first section before you begin to read. At the end of the section, or at a natural break after a few pages, go back and write summary statements at the bottom of the pages to help you retain the author's content. Reflect on the content and add comments to the summary statements if you wish. Keep small post-it notes or stick-on page tabs handy, and when you encounter a passage or statement that you would like to remember or use in a paper, highlight the passage and use a tab to mark the page. Put a cue word on the tab so you can find the quote later. Then move on to the next section and repeat the process.

When you end your study session, or when you complete a chapter or article, go back and review the contents by answering your study questions and reviewing your summary statements, as well as any highlighted or tabbed passages.

When you pick up your reading at the next study session, begin with a review of the previous chapter's study questions and summary statements. Checking the class syllabus as well as the book's table of contents will provide you with important understandings about how the reading connects to your lectures and help you remember details.

Adapting PQ4R to journal articles

While journal articles are short, they are dense and often contain content that you are asked to evaluate, unlike textbooks. The preview process is not connected to a lecture, but is still essential. When you preview, notice the author(s) of the article (there are often footnotes at the bottom of the first page or the end of the article providing information about the authors); read any abstract or summary provided at the beginning of the article; notice the date of the article and source (who published it); and finally skim the headings for sections.

Before you read each section, write questions to guide your study in the margins. Most journal articles provide answers to the following questions: what is the history of this problem? Why is it an important problem? How did the author study the problem (what did he or she do?). What data came out of the study? What conclusions does the author make? What next steps, if any, does he or she propose? Reflect on each section of the research report as you complete reading, writing comments in the margin if you wish.

When you are finished with the article, review it by writing answers in the margin under each question so that you have an outline of the study. You should highlight and if necessary tab significant findings that you will use in term papers or class discussions.

Practices which are usually not productive for students:

- Using highlighters to mark important passages as you read (it's all important!)
- Falling behind the syllabus in your reading
- Reading while listening to music with lyrics
- Writing outlines of all the important information in each chapter
- Rewriting or typing class notes

Practices that work for many students:

- Reading in 50 minute blocks, followed by a ten minute break
- Reciting or reviewing material while talking out loud or moving your lips (have your learning style analyzed to find out if this is a good technique for you).
- Using study time to self-test rather than rereading the entire text (targeted rereading of material you have forgotten is helpful).
- Joining a study group to discuss the reading.
- Getting regular exercise, which makes sitting for long periods easier