

How to Read Textbooks

Before reading any text, read the table of contents, read the preface and thumb through the entire books.

To Read texts with headings and subheadings:

- Place an index card at the end of the chapter. The card provides a reasonable goal and you will maintain your reading rate as you approach it.
- Read the introduction before the first heading and then read all of the headings and subheadings throughout the chapter. Turn the major headings into questions and number them. Your goals are to construct a mental outline of the chapter and to provide focus for your readings. Also look at all of the graphics. Then read the summary so that you will recognize the main ideas in the chapter when you come to them.
- Return to the beginning of the chapter, read the first question and then underline the answer as you read. Use the subheadings to identify the parts of your answer. Reduce the answer to a number (such as “3 factors”) or a mnemonic device (such as “jel” for the judicial, executive, legislative branches of the government) and write this aid to memory under the heading. Repeat this process throughout the chapter.
- Return to the beginning of the chapter again, read the first question while you cover the text with a piece of paper and recite the answer out loud or write a brief outline of it. Repeat this process for each question. (This step should be done each time that you read a chapter, but realistically, students often do not have time for it. However, if you followed steps #1-#3 and do step #4 several times to prepare for an exam, your exam preparation will be much more effective.)

To read texts without headings and subheadings:

- The goals of this method are the same as those for texts with headings but the process differs somewhat. Placing an index card at the end of the chapter is still the first step, however.
- Read the first paragraph. Using the eraser end of a pencil to help you track, read the first few words of each paragraph until you identify the topic (a noun phrase) of the paragraph (such as “various methods for reading textbooks exist but...”). Read the last paragraph.
- With this outline in mind, read the chapter and underline main ideas.
- On the index card, write the major questions that this chapter answers and the “reduced” answer (again, a number or mnemonic) to question. Use this card for the review process.