

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

Well, one thing is for sure, college students have to do a LOT of reading. Sometimes you may feel quite overwhelmed with the amount of reading you have to do. If you just look at the number of pages you have to read – at the number of chapters and oh my goodness the number of WORDS – no wonder you feel overwhelmed.

The trick with reading for college, like with everything else you do for college, is to figure out a system that works for you, tweak it when you need to, and then **STICK WITH IT.**

We've got some basic suggestions which apply to any material you read for college, and then some specific suggestions for reading different types of books – math, science, foreign language, history, literature and poetry. We'll show you how to organize your reading to make it more manageable, but it's up to you to do the work. **You HAVE to keep up with your assigned readings. If possible, read your textbook BEFORE class. If you don't keep up, you'll be what they call up the creek without a paddle come final exam time.**

Ready? Here we go.

Consider your environment.

- **Choose a time when you're AWAKE.** Reading textbooks can be hard enough as it is; you don't want to be yawning before you even start.
- Find a comfortable place to read, but not on your bed or lounging on the sofa. You don't want to drift to sleep. **You should be sitting up, in a well-lighted area where it's not too hot or too cold.**
- **Eat something** so you're not distracted by a rumbly tummy.
- **Turn off your cell phone** or at least put it on silent.
- **Make sure you have a highlighter and pencil.**

Consider your attitude.

- **"Turn off" your personal life.** If you are preoccupied, set a time limit and tell yourself you will think about whatever it is then. You can do it, you can be strong! If your mind drifts back to the personal issue, be resolute and remind yourself you'll think about it later. Then, later, you can deal with "real life" without feeling guilty about studying.

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

- If you find your mind wandering it might help to get up, stretch and get a drink of water or just walk around for a minute or two.
- Don't read for too long. You will learn much more in shorter spurts of an hour or two than with 500 pages in one day.

You're settled – now what?

Reading for class, means reading ACTIVELY. You can't just slide your eyes over the pages as they slowly glaze over and assume that because you turned those pages you'll magically be able to regurgitate the material on a test. You have to ask questions, underline, write notes in the margins and on paper, look up words, summarize, flip back to make sure you understand what came before, and jump ahead to see if things are explained better further on. You have to look for main points and discover the thesis and conclusion for every section.

It's not as hard as it sounds.

Start by previewing the chapter.

- If there's a summary at the end, read it FIRST.
- If there are questions or vocabulary lists at the end, read them because they'll give you an idea of what is most important in the chapter.
- If there are subheadings, read them first (or, after the summary and questions 😊)
 - Turn the subheadings into questions. "Causes of the War of 1812," becomes "What were the causes of the War of 1812?" Later, when you read the chapter, concentrate on answering the questions.
- If there's no summary, and there are no questions or subheadings, get out your pencil.
 - Read the first couple of paragraphs until you find a sentence that states what the chapter will be about. Underline it.
 - Read the last couple of paragraphs to find the conclusion. Underline it.
 - Compare the underlined sentences to figure out the main idea of the chapter.
 - Go back, read the first sentence of every paragraph and underline the ones that state a new idea.

Reading all of your underlined sentences will give you the chapter outline.

Seeing the "whole picture" before you begin reading will help tremendously in your understanding of how parts of a chapter fit into the whole.

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

Now for the nitty-gritty – ready, set, READ.

- **Run your finger under each line;** this helps to keep your mind focused on the sentence you're reading. You can do it with highlighter in hand.
- **Highlight key points.**
- **Write notes in the margins;** write questions in the margins.
- **Make up a set of simple symbols, to use in the text and in the margins of ALL of your reading.** The following are just suggestions.
 - ! very important!
 - ? huh?
 - √ important quote
 - vocabulary – look it up!
 - names and dates
- **Summarize each paragraph out loud after you read it. Even better – write down brief notes on what you read, in your own words. If you type them up afterwards – wow! You've processed the same information four times. You read it, you underlined it, you summarized it out loud, you wrote it down and you typed it up! You should know that material by now!**
- **One last thing; if your textbook has questions in the back, use them to read actively. Read backwards. Start with the questions, and then find the answers in the chapter.**

Later . . .

When it's time to study for an exam, re-reading your chapters should be easy. Having put all of your energy into reading them right the first time, **re-reading them should be a matter of refreshing your memory on things you've already learned.**

Now that you have an idea of how to read any textbook, let's look at some from special fields of study.

How to read an essay for analysis

- With highlighter in hand, read the essay over quickly looking for the author's main ideas. Circle any words you don't understand.
- After you have read the essay once, check the definitions of any new words and write them at the bottom of the page in which the word first appears.
- Now, read the essay again and really focus on finding the main idea or thesis. Often, an essayist will state his thesis at the beginning of the essay and the following paragraphs support it, or he will lead up to the thesis and state it at the end.

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

- Once you think you have found the thesis, highlight it and paraphrase it. If you think you found more than one thesis, you will see as you read more closely that they all fit together in some way to form solid point.
- Now reread the essay for structure. Highlight the most important sentence in each paragraph (usually the first sentence). You may find paragraphs that do not seem to contribute significantly to the thesis – these may be illustrations or examples. They are only important as “filler” in an exam.
- You now have the skeleton of the author’s argument. In outline form, write out a thesis statement and below it, all of the supporting arguments. You should now really understand the essay and be able to write your own essay analyzing it.

The Sciences

Science writing, like science class, is generally linear and cumulative. That means, you have to take it in a certain order and if you don’t understand what comes first you won’t understand what comes afterwards. If you don’t get the first paragraph, you won’t get the next, or the last.

- It’s REALLY important that you read the chapter before you have the class. Preview, read (including diagrams and formulae), and look up any new vocabulary. Highlight if you want, but you needn’t take notes and if you don’t understand all of the material, don’t worry. You’re looking for the big picture. The lecture will explain the details, and the lab will put them into practice.
- After class, re-read the chapter using the method discussed above. For science, however,
 - Pay special attention to tables, graphs, equations and formulae. Make SURE you understand them. If you don’t, ask your professor or TA at the next class.
 - Consider making flash cards of important information such as classifications, definitions or formulae you need to memorize.
 - Make sure you understand each section before moving on to the next.
 - If there are exercises or questions at the end of the chapter, DO THEM.

If you still don’t understand something in the chapter, Google it. Look on Wikipedia or check out another textbook. Ask your professor if there’s another book that might explain it in simpler terms.

Math

In a math book, every word counts. And even more than science books, math books are linear and cumulative. Every page, every concept, every chapter builds on the previous one. You have to understand every sentence before you move on to the next.

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

- Math books often have learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter; read them carefully so that you understand what you are going to learn!
- CONCENTRATE. You need to read your math book slowly and carefully, highlighter and pencil in hand to mark vocabulary and questions.
- When you get to the examples, go through each step, one after the other. Study them carefully because they show you how to do the homework and test questions.
- In a separate notebook or on note cards, make lists of important ideas such as definitions, theorems and formulae.
- If you don't understand something, try the following:
 - Re-read the previous page.
 - Read ahead to the next page.
 - Study all graphs, diagrams, charts and examples carefully.
 - Read the passage out loud.
 - Check your class notes to see if the material was covered there.
 - Refer to another math textbook or look it up on line.
 - If you still have a problem, write down exactly what it is you don't understand and ask your professor or TA.
- Solve EVERY problem in the chapter, and if there is one, complete the corresponding chapter in the accompanying workbook.

Foreign Language Instruction

Read a foreign language textbook using the following approach –

- **Preview.** What is the chapter about? Read the examples to see how much you understand from previous lessons. Look at the vocabulary lists, and at the grammatical tables.
- **Relate.** Relate new vocabulary to previously learned words, and look for similarities between English and the new language, in grammar and construction. If you don't understand English grammar, check out a grammar website such as <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/> or <http://www.chompchomp.com/>.
- **Memorize.** Learn the vocabulary and memorize new grammatical structures and verb conjugations.
- **Read aloud.** Read the selections aloud and try to guess the meaning of new words. As you learn the vocabulary and grammar, re-read the selections until you really know them. Get the most benefit from your textbook by using it in the language lab.

Reading the sciences, math and foreign language textbooks involves grasping the most important FACTS, with the author's own meaning, from the long strings of words. Reading

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

history, literature and poetry involves understanding first but then putting your own interpretation on what the author has said.

History

When reading a history book you must first preview the text, in the same way as any other book – read the chapter headings and subheadings, the introduction and the conclusion first.

- **Make a note of important words;** nationalism, famine, monasticism, invention ... words that give you a clue as to what the book is about. Write them down in a notebook or a separate sheet of paper. **Words that are repeated several times are likely to be key to the author's argument.**
- **Look for main points early or late in the book, in the chapter and even in each paragraph.** The author generally states his thesis in the introduction and restates it at the end, and the chapters in between contain his argument.
- **Skim the rest of the book** – read the first and last paragraphs of each chapter and then the paragraphs in between, highlighting important information. **If you don't understand something, look up any new words, make a note in the margin and plow ahead.**
- **TAKE NOTES as you read.** If you write down the main ideas in your own words, chapter by chapter, you will have a clear outline of the book's thesis. Summarize!
- **Make a timeline.** Jot down important dates with the associated names and events in chronological order. That way, you will have a clear sense of what happened when, which, as you might guess, is pretty important in history. 😊

Once you've previewed – or skimmed – the assigned text, re-read it more slowly to take in the details and to make sure you understand the sections you questioned earlier. Based on your notes and highlighting you should know what is most important. **As you re-read, evaluate the author's argument in the following way:**

- **Look for reasons and evidence supporting the thesis.**
- **Question the reasons and evidence.** Do you agree? Why or why not?
- **Add your own comments to the notes you took previously.**

If possible, ALWAYS type up your outlines, notes and comments. Learning is an ACTIVITY. If you read it, write it, and then thoughtfully type it (here is your chance to flesh it out) you will be well on your way to understanding the material.

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

Finally, in a history class you will be asked to give your own interpretation of specific events and long-term trends. Don't just repeat what the author said; you need to think about it, explain it, and agree or disagree.

Literature

Literature! Oh boy. Literature can fill your heart and soul with wondrous imaginings and take you to places you never even dreamed of. It can make you laugh and cry and exalt. It can also drag you down, word by endless word by word by word into an abyss of what the HECK is this?!

It's all in the understanding.

Literature is NOT the kind of writing that you should preview or read the chapter headings, beginning and end first. But you can set yourself up for success.

- Read the introduction.
- Read a review of the book.
- Read for longer stretches of time. Sometimes a book doesn't begin to get interesting for 50 or even 100 pages. Don't give up in despair after 15 minutes. You need to get into the flow. You may even need a dictionary.
- Discuss it with a classmate.
- Underline significant or beautiful passages; note themes and recurrent images.
- OKAY if you really have to, look at the Cliff Notes – but DON'T depend on them. Famous literature is famous literature for a reason, and you'll be a better educated person for having read the classics.
- You may hate the book despite your best efforts. A certain college student who shall remain nameless threw Moby Dick across the room and broke the spine in frustration. She did manage to read it in the end, but she sure never liked it!
- Remember, the more you read, the better you write – this will stand you in good stead in ALL of your classes.

Having established that you actually have to READ literary works, here are some things to think about as you do.

- What are your initial impressions?
 - Do you enjoy reading it?
 - Is it easy or difficult? Why? Does the language suit the author's message?
 - Does your first impression change by the end of the book? If so, why?

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

- **Look at the language.**
 - Is it simple and to the point, or is it flowery and complicated? Does the language help you or hinder you in reading the story?
 - Do the characters speak in dialect? Do you understand what they are saying? Does dialect draw you into the characters' lives or does it put you off?
 - If you're reading a translation, do you have a sense that the original meaning comes through?
- **Consider the literary techniques.**
 - **Plot** – what are the major events of the story? How are they presented and how are they related? Are they chronological or out of order? Are events foreshadowed or seen as flashbacks?
 - **Conflict** – what are the main conflicts of the story? Are they external (between people) or are they internal (in the mind of the protagonist)? Are the conflicts resolved by the end of the story?
 - **Character** – are the characters believable? Do you care about them (even if you don't like them)? Are they well-rounded? Do they change or develop through the course of the story?
 - **Point of view** – is the story written in the first person or the third person? Do we see into the minds of the characters or only observe their actions? Does the point of view change through the story?
 - **Images and symbols** – note images that appear throughout the work. A child may be represented as a doll, or a marriage as a garden. What does the author mean to convey by these images?
- **Understand the theme(s).** The theme is the central idea, message or meaning of a literary work. Some works have only one theme, others have many intertwined and even conflicting themes. Themes would be love/hate, good/evil or individual/society. A story tells of two lovers (Romeo and Juliet) but the themes involve family, conflict, fate, and love.

Having read and analyzed the literary work on each of these points, you can evaluate it, write about it and discuss it in class.

- What have you learned that pertains to your own life?
- Did it shed light on another culture or another time?
- Do you agree or disagree with the evaluations made by other readers?
- Did you enjoy the work more or less after having analyzed it? Why?
- Would you encourage others to read it?

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

Poetry

Here are some suggestions for understanding poetry, which can be the most beautiful of the literary forms, or the most frustrating.

- Before your very first reading, look for punctuation marks to see if there are commas, periods and exclamation points.
- Read SENTENCES rather than lines if possible. Even if there are no punctuation marks, try to find each complete thought or image.
- If you don't understand a sentence or image, look for the SUBJECT, VERB, and OBJECT. They may be out of order, and if you put them in the common order they will make more sense. The famous lines,
*What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;*
really mean, "a rose would smell as sweet by any other name."
- You may need to look up words in the dictionary, or figure out certain phrases. What Shakespeare (duh, those lines are from Romeo and Juliet but you knew that, right?) actually meant, was, "a rose would smell as sweet even if we called it something else."

So, with those three points in mind (read sentences or complete thoughts, reorder them if you need to, and look up words and try to figure out strange phrases), here is how to read a poem for class:

- Identify the sentences.
- Look up words you don't understand.
- Read a few lines several times to figure out the rhythm and flow of the words.
- Read the poem out loud to feel the flow.
- Mark off sections, independent thoughts and images.
- Read the poem out loud to understand how the images or thoughts follow one another.
- Think about the tone or emotion of the poem; what feeling is the poet trying to convey?
- Read the poem out loud concentrating on the emotion.
- Read the poem out loud AGAIN, putting all of the elements together.

At this point, you haven't analyzed the poem, (consider the same points as for any other literary style), but you should understand it and have a sense of the poet's purpose. And, hopefully, a sense of the beauty of the images, the grace of the words, and the relevance of the meaning.

Foster Care to Academic Success

How to Read for College

College involves a LOT of reading, but if you break it down into four steps – previewing or skimming for the main ideas, reading for details or supporting evidence, taking notes, and thinking about what you read – you should not feel overwhelmed.

And remember the most important point of all. **STAY ON TOP OF YOUR READING.** Read chapters as they are assigned. It is much easier to cope with one 30-page chapter in two days, than it is to face six chapters totaling hundreds of pages, the week before the exam.

Good luck!