

## **READING #1—KNOW YOUR TEXTBOOK (NO NEED TO TAKE NOTES.)**

Special Note: You need to do this initial reading only the first time you encounter your textbook.

1. Examine the title page:
  - Who are the authors and what are their qualifications?
  - Who is the publisher and when was the text published? What does that tell you about the book?
2. Examine the preface or introduction:
  - What is the purpose of the preface?
  - Do the authors introduce any unusual features of your book in the preface and prepare you to be on the lookout for them?
3. Examine the table of contents:
  - What does the table of contents tell you about the history covered?
  - How is this textbook organized? What are the main divisions?
4. Examine the index, glossary, and other material at the back of the book:
  - What sort of topics should be looked up in the index instead of in the table of contents?
  - Is there a glossary in your textbook? Can you use accent markings to pronounce the words?
  - Is there an appendix in your book? Why isn't this information included in the body of the book?
5. Examine the study questions, guides, and other learning aids:
  - Are the study aids in the form of questions, exercises, or activities? Where are they located throughout the chapter?
  - If the text uses questions, do they merely require finding the answers, or must you perform some critical problem-type thinking to arrive at answers?
  - Does the text provide suggestions for other readings or materials designed to help you understand this chapter?
6. Examine the chapter headings, sectional headings, margin guides, and graphics features:
  - How do the chapter headings and the section headings help you structure your thinking?

- How do headings and different type fonts help you when skimming a chapter for specific information?
- How can you use topic sentences, photo captions, other artwork (maps, charts, diagrams, tables), and summaries to extend and organize your reading?

## **READING #2—SURVEY THE CHAPTER (NO NEED TO TAKE NOTES.)**

Before your in-depth reading of each textbook chapter, it is helpful to spend a few minutes surveying the material. This survey is similar to knowing the overall plot of a movie before watching it. During the second reading stage, you are merely getting primed. Skim through the chapter and see how the headings and subheadings are organized. Read any chapter summaries. Briefly survey the chapter introduction by reading the topic sentences in each paragraph.

As you complete this quick survey, you will want to ask the following questions:

- What is the overall theme for this chapter?
- What historical period is covered?
- What significant changes take place in the period covered by this chapter?
- Can you make any connections or comparisons of items in the text to your prior knowledge or a preceding chapter?

The point of this step is to gain the big picture that the chapter is trying to impart and to understand the overall view before you take a deep dive into the material. At this point, you haven't written any notes and likely have spent around five minutes in your survey of the material. Nevertheless, you have a good preview of what you will be reading and have saved yourself time since you will complete the next step more efficiently.

## **READING #3—"DEEP DIVE" READING FOR UNDERSTANDING (TAKE NOTES.)**

As your instructor will tell you, reading the assigned material *before* a class lecture or lesson is crucial to understanding the material presented in class. As you do this, remember that you must read actively and maintain focus. The best way to stay focused is to take notes, but first you must understand what you have read. A brief online search for active reading strategies will result in tips touting techniques with five, six, or even ten steps to improve your active reading. But nearly all of those resources share four main components:

1. asking questions while you read
2. identifying or defining any unfamiliar words
3. taking well-organized notes
4. writing a summary of the material

The actions do not always need to take place in this order. Over time, they will develop into a habit—a “habit of mind”—that will come naturally. These four actions are the most significant strategies for successful active reading.

### **Ask Questions**

Continually asking questions is at the heart of historical thinking, as well as critical reading. One technique is that as you’re reading a textbook, try changing all the titles, subtitles, and section and paragraph headings into questions. See Chapter 1: The Rise of Universalizing Religions, page 3 of the textbook, for example. The section heading “The Appeal of Christianity” might become “What was the appeal of Christianity?” Or, you could employ the five “W” questions to attack the reading: *Who* is the chapter/section about? *What* does the chapter/section say about this person or group? *Where* did the actions involving this person/group take place? *When* did these actions take place? (Don’t forget that this is history; dates matter.) *Why* did the events take place? Why are these events significant? Why should we care?

No one set of questions is right for everyone, so you might try both of these suggested questioning techniques to determine what works best for you. Over time, you may develop your own set of questions based on the type of textbook or subject that you’re studying.

### **Identify Unfamiliar Words**

Comprehending what you are reading begins by fully understanding the words found in the text. As you read, are there any words you don’t understand? If so, it is imperative that you clarify or define those words so that you can more clearly understand the passage or section.

Typically, the first step readers take is to try and understand the word based on the context (how the term is used in a sentence, paragraph, or section). Does the word become clearer as you reread the words preceding it or as you read further into the text? While context clues are frequently a solid way to decipher meaning, looking words up in a dictionary, glossary, or other source is an important technique used by active readers. Adding new terms to your notes can expand your history vocabulary and enrich your essay writing.

If you encounter a confusing or hard passage, defining any unfamiliar terms will typically ease the confusion. However, there are times when even if you do know the terms, you may find that you still don’t completely understand. The final step to fully identify what you’re reading is often to *slowly reread* a sentence, paragraph, or section—even aloud. Varying your reading rate and slowing down for tough passages is often necessary for understanding. Slow down enough to enable yourself to untangle tough sections and get an accurate idea of the essential concepts in the passage.

### **Take Notes**

As you complete the “deep dive” reading for understanding, you will want to take notes. Reading the text alone is not adequate. Good note-taking is a key component

of learning the material and remembering the most important points. Note-taking may seem like a simple task, yet students often experience difficulties with it. The first thing you should remember is that highlighting is not the same as note-taking (especially if you find yourself highlighting nearly everything!). Actively writing out your ideas will help reinforce learning, but you should take notes only after you comprehend the passage. Ask questions, identify words and concepts, and summarize the material as you read each chapter, then use an outline to guide your note-taking. The easiest outline is one based on the textbook chapter headings, sub-headings, and subsections. Using your outline, go back through the text and take notes of the items that signify the main ideas and supporting details of that section.

Another difficulty that students often face is taking too many notes. If your notes include most of the text in the book, there's a good chance you aren't differentiating between the author's main points and the material used to tie these points together. So, be concise. Create a set of abbreviations for frequent words or use symbols. Possible examples might include a triangle or delta sign ( $\Delta$ ) to indicate change, a down arrow ( $\downarrow$ ) to indicate a decline, or a dollar sign (\$) to indicate money, and so on. The key thing is that you don't need to write everything; the main idea and one or two examples will suffice. As an early part of your note-taking, you might consider marking comments in the margins of the book, if you own it. If you don't, write your comments on sticky notes and place them in the margins. Once you have completed this, add those comments and a summary to your notes for that section.

### **Write a Summary**

When you write a summary, you should precisely and briefly account for the most significant parts of a text. If you can write an effective overview, it is a decent sign that you read the text carefully and comprehended its major arguments and supporting points. Your summary should explain the main idea of each chapter and answer each of the questions that you originally posed. For most people, this is the final step of the note-taking process. For your purposes, a summary does not need to be too long; between 35 and 50 words should be sufficient.

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