

READING TEXTBOOKS

The SQ3R Method Applied to Actively Reading Textbooks

Academic Resource Center

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The initials SQ3R stand for successive stages in active reading: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. This method is a widely-used, time-tested way to help you develop a particular mental discipline – the ability to grasp and retain what you need to know from assignments in textbooks. You should *attack* a textbook for what you need from it. Avoid a passive approach such as highlighting, and keep underlining to a minimum. Don't expect to become an instant expert at using SQ3R: as in any other physical or mental discipline, improvement comes with sustained practice.

Survey: Take roughly five minutes to scan your entire textbook assignment. What's it about as a whole? Note the section and subsection headings. Glance at any charts or picture captions, graphs or maps. Read more carefully any summary at the end. You should now have an idea of the main topic of the assignment as well as of its constituent parts.

Question: Go back to the first major section or subsection in your assignment. Turn its heading into a question that you scribble in the page margin. *Make a conscious effort to take this question seriously:* it's the key that will unlock what you need to know from this section.

Read: Now read the first headed section to answer your question, paragraph by paragraph. Don't get distracted; focus steadily on finding the answer to that question.

Recite: On finishing the first section, look up and force yourself to recite, *in your own words*, the answer to the question you asked at Stage 2. It's absolutely vital that you struggle to translate the textbook's language into your own words. If you can't *say aloud* the answer in your own words, reexamine the section until you can do so.

Next go on to the second major section of the assignment and repeat the "Question" and "Read" stages. Keep at it for twenty-five to forty minutes, then take a five to ten minute break in which you get up and move about. If you're reading as actively as you should, you'll find the process fatiguing; you'll feel that you *need* that break. Proceed thus through the entire assignment, with breaks as needed.

Review: At some point within twenty-four hours of your initial reading, see if you can recall the answers, in your own words, to the questions you scribbled in the page margins. You can lose up to 80% of what you've learned if you don't again "recite" within the first twenty-four hours. Research also suggests that as much as 40% of your learning should be spent on testing your mastery of the material in this way.

As you proceed, write your answer to each question in the form of short phrases or cue words in one of the following places – in the margins of your text, on a separate sheet, or on a card; your teacher probably will recommend one of these places in particular. If you write the cue phrase in your textbook, draw a square around it so as to set it off clearly from the questions written there. If you can't recall the answers in *your own words* to the inscribed questions, take the time to refresh your memory.

Now you're almost ready for a quiz or (later) an exam on the material. Before the next class and again before the exam, again focus on the questions written in the margin. Cover the answers you've inscribed there, if you wrote "boxed" answers in your text. Can you still recall the answers to these questions? If not, rely on those "boxed" cue words to evoke once more the full answer. As the class or exam date

approaches you'll be enormously relieved to find that you don't experience the anxiety of having to cram for the quiz or exam.