



Four Steps to Reading a Textbook Quickly and Effectively

Effective textbook reading is a key study skill for [student success](#). Nearly every class makes you read them.

“Makes” is the right word here. “Requires,” “forces” or “insists” will also work. Few people read textbooks unless they have to. If you read textbooks for fun, shoot me an email. I need to interview you, because I don’t think you exist.

Reading textbooks is weird. That’s right – weird. Granted, we all have to read them. But even you bookworms – the kinds of people who devour the Twilight books in one week, or Harry Potter or the Hunger Games books – know that textbooks are a bit weird.

Think about it. Textbooks are the only books you read today that have pictures on nearly every page (Dr. Seuss fans excluded). In fact, should you be forced to read a textbook without pictures, you are in real trouble. Those books get seriously tough. Nevertheless, understanding how to read a textbook is vital.

The goal of a textbook is simple: **inform and educate**.

The goal of the Harry Potter books is very different. Novels tell stories. Textbooks communicate ideas through explanations of information. Because of this, you need a different strategy for reading textbooks. Follow these four easy steps to get on your way.

1. *Don’t read front to back* (aka, READ BACKWARDS).

Reading a textbook chapter front to back ensures that you will waste time.

I know it’s counter-intuitive to not read a book front to back, but don’t do it. Mystery novels stink when you read the back first, as do good thriller movies. If you read the last page of a Sherlock Holmes novel before you read the story, it’ll be lame. If you know Bruce Willis is dead, don’t watch the 6th Sense.

But textbooks are rarely building to a suspenseful twist at the end. I promise. I’ve read a lot. They don’t come with surprise endings. “And then, Abraham Lincoln dodged the bullet!” Yep, that’s never going to be in a textbook.

Want to try this strategy? Try reading your textbook chapters in this order:

- a. Go to the *questions* at the end first. Read them, answer them to the best of your ability and then begin your actual reading strategies. This will sort of “prime the engine” of retention.
- b. Next, read the final *summary* of the chapter. This will give you a general background as to the Big Ideas in the chapter.
- c. Third, look at the *headings* and *subdivision* of the chapter.

d. Fourth, read the chapter *introduction*.

From that point you can then work through the chapter from front to back. By taking this out-of-order strategy, you are focusing not on the chronological order, but rather connecting together the ideas found in the chapter. *This is infinitely more important than reading things in the order they were written.*

2. *Read for Big Ideas.*

Textbooks are extremely thorough. You, while needing thoroughness, are not going to be able to absorb every tiny detail found in a chapter. You have to focus on what's most important.

Textbooks are great because they explain those Big Ideas in context, but make sure you don't get lost in the minutiae. Read for the Big Ideas first and foremost and you'll be able to sift through the mountain of information available.

In textbooks, Big Ideas are easy to spot because they are often in bold print or section headings. Look for the *complete sentence that summarizes and drives each subdivision* and you'll have identified the Big Ideas.

3. *Read for Key Details.*

Big Ideas need support. Otherwise they're just opinions. After you identify each Big Idea, make note of the supporting details that fill out and help the Big Idea make sense.

While this looks different in each subject, they should be relatively easy to pick out. Key people, places and events often make up the key details in history books. Grammar rules are frequently the important details in grammar books. For languages, vocabulary is one of the most important key details of the chapter. Check your notes against the questions at the end of the chapter. If they reflect the same key details, you know you are barking up the right tree.

4. *Read the book once but your notes multiple times.*

You should never have to read a chapter more than once (in theory). If you've done your reading well and taken notes as you read, you have a record of the thoughts communicated.

Granted, it takes a while to adapt to this approach. Don't be upset if you have a time of adjustment before being able to read a chapter only once.

But if you put in the work now to get used to reading a textbook more effectively, consider the time you'll save in the long-run. We promise you'll see the benefits quickly. If you're already using this type of active reading strategy, congratulations on making the honor roll without losing your social life. Well done.