

Reading Methods

One of the main obstacle to retaining what you have read is not having a clear grasp of why you are actually reading the material in the first place. It may sound rather banal, but unless you know what the author is trying to tell you, remembering what you have read can become extremely difficult. Think a moment about the memory palace technique and why it really does help us remember things. Naturally, visual associations and actions are contextualized in unordinary ways in this mnemonic technique, and this helps us to remember, but one of the most distinguishing features is the spatial or structural associations being made between a physical space and the word or phrase to be remembered. Our memory works best when it has a supporting structure where we can literally plug things in. In order to improve reading retention (and overall retention) it is a good idea to have a sound structure that we can use to plug in what we are learning.

The starting point is to have a clear understanding of the main reasons you are reading the material before you begin so that there is a structure you can attach concepts and information to. In a certain sense, it is like having a tree you can attach additional concepts (branches) and information (leaves) to in building your understanding of the material. If you don't have such a construction, it is much more difficult to retain information because you cannot make the appropriate associations.

Here is an example of how having a firm anchor can help you understand, associate and retain. Read the following paragraph and then recite as much information as you can about what you read.

The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step, otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important, but complications can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but then one never can tell. After the procedure is completed one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then they can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually they will be used once more and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, that is part of life.

Think about how much easier it would have been to remember all the information in the paragraph if you knew that it was about doing laundry! We all know how to do laundry and the processes that are involved. In other words, we already have a structure or map of what we must do to wash clothes. Once you've contextualized the material that you are about to read

with respect to what you already know, remembering becomes that much easier. Once we have established how important it is to have a mental structure to attach concepts and information to, we can consider a reading technique that builds on this concept.

Where to read?

Before we begin with how to read, we need to know where to read. Many students think that the obvious choice is the library. This might actually be a great place because it is usually available most of the time, it has most of the material that you need, you don't have to worry about whether there is enough light or the temperature is too hot or cold, there is normally plenty of room to spread out your books, notes, etc. and is free of disturbance (most people follow the rule of not disturbing others). However, it might not be free of distractions. The library often presents an insidious danger - friends. Good intentions are often sidelined by the proximity of friends who can resist the urge of a chat, cup of coffee or a snack. Taking a short break at regular intervals is actually conducive to learning, but often these breaks turn into extended excuses not to study. Some people don't find the library comfortable because they like their own chair in their dorm room or they don't have enough space to store their study materials (if they have storage space at all). Reading in your room can be a viable alternative as long as it possesses the requirements indicated above. In the end, your reading/study environment should be a comfortable place where you are sure you can concentrate without disturbances or distractions, while having all the materials you need.

SQ3R

One of the most widely used methods was developed in 1946 by Francis Pleasant Robinson in his book entitled *Effective Study*. The technique was designed for college students, but it can be used in virtually any situation. SQ3R is an acronym that stands for five steps that you can follow to increase reading retention:

1. Survey
2. Question
3. Read
4. Recall
5. Review

These steps help you allocate your time effectively by reading the most appropriate material, integrating it with existing knowledge (attaching it to a mental structure) and reading for the right level of detail.

Survey>

The first thing is to make sure that the material you have identified will be useful for you. Start by scanning the table of contents, introduction, titles and subtitles. If it seems to be what you are looking for, then scan the chapter

summaries as well. This will give you a good overview of the text, which, as we saw above, will help you contextualize your reading once you have determined that the material is appropriate.

Once you have decided to read the material, start with the first chapter (in a longer piece) and read through the introduction again along with the titles and subtitles. Then take a look at the typographical elements (italics, bold, subheadings and boxed text), as this will allow you to grasp what the key words or ideas are. Finally, explore any images, maps, charts, or diagrams present in the text.

Question

What are the reasons why you are going to read this material? Note the questions that led you to consider reading the material and any that occurred to you during your survey. Think about what you want to achieve by reading this material, what you want to find out and how it will help you in general.

This is an important step because it engages your mind and prepares it for the learning process. Look at it this way, when you need to find the address of the restaurant where you want to eat, you are researching and reading for a purpose, and you are more likely to retain this information because you are actively searching for it. The same holds true when you are reading to master information for any of the courses you are taking.

Read

Now it's time to begin reading the material. Read one section at a time and make note of whatever you don't understand. Remember you are also looking for the answers to the questions you formulated in the previous step. One good way to ensure that you have understood the material is to turn every heading or subheading into a question that you must answer before moving on to the next. If you are reading correctly, it might take you more time than you initially thought. You can also use the Cornell Note Taking method as well to write down key concepts and questions.

Recall

After you've completed the assigned reading, run through it mentally a few times trying to identify the key points and how the other information fits in. Again, if you have a clear mental structure of the processes, concepts, etc. it will help you retain the information. At this point, go back to the questions you formulate in step 2 and attempt to answer them from memory. Use the text only if you can't answer them without textual reference.

Review

Once you are able to recall all the information, you can begin the review phase of the method. Begin by rereading the document or your notes, especially if you are unsure whether you have understood all of the content.

At this point, discuss the material with another person by explaining what you have learned in a contextualized manner. In other words, explain it within the scope of the course you are taking, the project you are working on, etc. Last but not least, review the material on a regular basis. A good idea is to review it on a regular basis (after a week, a month, etc.) to embed it into long-term memory.