“Active Reading”
*Read with a Purpose (… it’s more fun & interesting)*

Reading is not always reading. When you read, it is important to first know why you are reading - to have a purpose. Your purpose for reading is important because it determines your planning and preparation for the reading. For example, Joe Student and Goldy Gopher are both reading Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*; Joe is reading it for a literature class and has to focus on word choice & how Shakespeare constructed the play; Goldy is reading it for fun (someone recommended it).

Technically, both Joe and Goldy are ‘reading’ *Macbeth* but how they approach the reading will be very different. Students taking a “passive” approach to college reading do not consider their purpose for taking on a reading assignment; they look at what they have to read and do it (starting at page one and reading until it’s over). “Active” readers approach reading with a purpose and develop a plan for assignments that increase comprehension & retention and reduce time & effort.

**The points below are considerations to help you become an “active” reader while at college.**

**Read with a PURPOSE** - already discussed above. Some purposes are listed below -

- To understand the material;
- To get a good grade on a test;
- To get 3 examples for a paper I’m writing;
- For fun;
- To pass time;
- To have a clue about tomorrow’s lecture;
- To learn the steps for tomorrow’s lab experiment;
- To have examples for my presentation;
- Because my professor said so;
- To see if this book is really as uninteresting as others say it is;
- ... and more.

** If you do not know why you are reading something (or what you want to get from it), stop and either talk to a classmate or visit your professor (or TA) for clarification on how course readings are related to lecture and/or exams and papers. **

**Know your PROFESSOR’S PURPOSE for assigning the reading** - too often students and professors are ‘on the wrong page’ when it comes to readings. For example:

- Some professors place heavy emphasis on readings - they expect that students complete readings in order to participate in classroom discussions; or their exam questions may be straight from the readings (lectures may not be as important for exams).
- Other professors place little or no emphasis on readings - they see the readings as supplements to lecture and classroom discussions, and assign them more as an option for curious students to increase their knowledge on a topic than to use them for exams or paper assignments.

In the first example, students taking an easy-going approach to readings are likely to struggle with the course, and in the second example, students being ‘diligent’ in reading all the material may find little reward for their efforts. In either example, it would be important for students to have a clear idea of the purpose readings serve for their courses.

*(TIP: Read the course syllabus to see how assigned texts/readings will be used and ask the professor directly about how he/she decided to choose them)*
Use NOTE CARDS to keep your brain active - the mention of note cards does not refer to ‘flash cards;’ rather it means carrying a supply of note cards around with you and use them to jot down questions, curiosities and/or ideas you might come up with related to your readings.

An example: You make plans to read a chapter on existentialism after dinner. While walking between morning classes with a friend, you may ask what your friend knows about existentialism (off the top of her head) and what she finds interesting or confusing about it. Jot down some thoughts or questions that come to mind from this brief interaction on a note card before your next class. Doing this “warms up” your brain and makes getting into the reading after dinner easier than if you were starting “cold.”

- Use note cards to jot down page numbers when you find good examples for a paper (this saves time searching for a good quote later);
- Use note cards to jot down examples of how you relate concepts/ideas learned from a reading to your own life;
- Use one side of a note card to list support for an issue & the other side to list opposing viewpoints - survey friends for thoughts on why they support or oppose an issue (jot down their thoughts).

When it’s time to study for an exam or write a paper, use the note cards to give you a head start - they will help you prioritize your study efforts and give you direction in shaping arguments for papers.

Read like a CRITICAL THINKER - too often, students read only to understand information or to obtain knowledge. This approach tends to work well in high school (where you might be quizzed on whether you retained the information read - or not) however college professors are often less interested in whether you can remember information than they are in whether you can do something with it or have an opinion about it. This latter emphasis is the foundation for critical thinking - taking in information and being curious about what it means to you and your life; who wrote it; how did they decide to include what they did; what did they leave out and why did they decide to leave it out; etc.?

Reading for many professors serves 2 purposes: to introduce students to a topic/concept (and get their thoughts started); and, to give students information with which to support their stance on an issue and/or approach to solving a problem.

(TIP: Find out what your professors expect from you on exams and assignments/papers. If they want you simply to retain information (and will quiz you on the ‘facts’), then read for memorization and retention; if they want you to take a stance on an issue, then approach your reading looking for differing positions on an issue and note examples that support or oppose your own position)
Use a READING SYSTEM - everyone knows how to perform the act of reading - you look at and recognize words (and their meaning). Active, college readers often use reading systems to help make their reading efforts more purposeful (in the ways discussed in this handout). There are any number of systems available so you may need to ‘shop around’ to find one that fits your personal learning style / approach. For the purpose of providing you with an example, the SQ3R system is described on the attached document (“SQ3R: A Practical Guide”). [Note in this system that the act of ‘reading’ is the 3rd of 5 steps in the overall process. For ‘passive’ readers, reading words if often the 1st step.]

Consider giving it a try.