Tips for Success: Managing College-Level Reading

Managing the difficulty level and/or amount of college reading can be a challenge, but it is essential in order to make the most of your classes and to prepare efficiently for exams and essays. Here are some tips on getting the most out of your course readings:

1. **Scope out the text before you start.** We tend to believe moving straight through a book from beginning to end is the only way to read. However, taking a few minutes to preview your materials can aid your comprehension and help you to better remember what you read. Before you start, read the description of the book on the back or, with a textbook, look at the Table of Contents, chapter outlines, and section headings. Read the introductory and concluding paragraphs. Page through the reading and look at pictures, tables, and graphs. If you have a broad conception of the structure of the reading (this chapter is covering this topic, in five main sections) before you begin, then the details will be easier to pay attention to as you read.

2. **Be an active reader.** You know that feeling when you look down at your reading material, only to realize you’ve read the same sentence over and over again? Avoid that by actively engaging with the material as you read. Take notes on a separate sheet of paper or in the margins. Write down brief summaries, clarification questions, and personal responses or underline/bookmark key quotes. Even a couple of question marks in the margin keep you focused and point you toward trouble areas. If reading with a friend, take a moment after each section to chat with each other about what you both read. Bonus: taking notes and summarizing the material (out-loud or in writing) can improve your memory and save you study time. Underlining quotes or writing responses can help you generate ideas and find details for papers you need to write.

3. **Figure out your best reading practices.** Are you most focused in the morning? At night? Do you read best with light music in the background or do you need total silence? Do you remember better when you discuss a reading with a friend or when you create your own reading outline? When a reading goes well—or disastrously!—take note of the conditions and work on replicating (or avoiding) them in future. Sometimes, simply creating the conditions for your personal best reading can greatly improve your success.

4. **Disconnect from social media.** We’ve all attempted to read something, only to find ourselves suddenly checking Facebook or texting with a friend. Put your phone on silent. Leave it on the other side of the room. Allow yourself breaks after sections or after a certain amount of time to check your social media accounts. Take advantage of the many apps which block certain websites to help you focus, such as SelfControl, Freedom, and Anti-Social. You will complete your reading faster and remember it better.

5. **Check your comprehension and prepare for class.** Even if you pay attention while reading, quickly switching gears to another assignment or activity might cause you to lose much of what you just read. Give yourself five minutes post-read to summarize the material, make a note of possible comments you could make (for a discussion-based class), and write down any questions that you hope the lecture or discussion will answer for you. You’ll feel more prepared, for class and for your eventual papers and exams.

Happy Reading!