Annotating a Textbook

Owl: Welcome to Annotating a Textbook, an instructional video on reading comprehension brought to you by the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab.

So you've been assigned to read a chapter or section in a textbook.

Most likely, your teacher plans to give a quiz, test, or exam on the material.

Student: Yes.

Owl: Well, reading a textbook is easier when you understand how it works.

You'll be able to find the information you need and remember it when it comes time to study.

Textbooks are a unique kind of genre with their own specialized organization and goals.

In general, most textbooks share the following qualities: They follow an explicit pattern of organization or structure, emphasize facts and evidence, rely on references to important research, introduce many new terms, and provide visual aids.

Okay. Let's look at the different elements that make up the structure of a typical chapter in a textbook.

A typical chapter may contain some or all of the following ten items:

1. An introduction, abstract, or synopsis that states the purpose of the chapter;
2. A list of chapter objectives, goals, or learning outcomes;
3. A chapter outline;
4. Titles, headings, and subheadings that divide up the chapter;
5. Key terms that are bold-faced, italicized, or made to stand out in some special way;
6. Boxes and sidebars to pull out key information;
7. Visual aids or figures;
8. A chapter summary or conclusion that reviews the main idea;
9. A vocabulary list or glossary;
10. Study questions and activities to help you focus on key ideas and remember them.

You can improve how well you read a textbook by applying five techniques.

First, remember to read with a pen, pencil, or highlighter in hand so that you can mark-up important information, such as key facts, terms, and ideas.
This will help you to remember them better and find them more easily when it comes time to study.

Also, write questions or comments in the margins as you read and answer any guide questions that you previously placed in the margins.

By doing so, you will improve your understanding and identify what you need to understand better.

Textbooks—especially those written for the physical and social sciences—often introduce and evaluate important theories.

When you come across a new theory, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is it called?
- Who proposed it and when?
- What does it explain and how?
- What evidence supports it?
- Are there counter-theories?
- If so, what are they?

You can improve your understanding of a theory by summarizing it in your own words.

You can do this in the margins or in a separate notebook.

Textbooks also tend to emphasize specialized or technical terms that are important to a field of study or discipline.

These terms are often singled out in bold-faced or italicized print and frequently accompanied by a definition in a sidebar or glossary.

Highlight or underline them.

Key terms can include the names of laws, theories, principles, models, concepts, patterns, systems, stages, processes, structures, parts, and important people in the field.

A good way to help you remember new vocabulary items such as specialized or technical terms is to make vocabulary flashcards.

As you read, make a list of all the terms that are new or challenging.

Then, look up the definition, either in the textbook or in a dictionary.

Write down the new word or phrase on one side of a note card.

Then write the definition on the other side.

Below that, write down a sentence using the word.

This will help you understand the word better.

When it comes time to study, you can challenge yourself by reading the word and guessing at the definition.

Then check your answer on the back of the flashcard.

Go here for more help with new vocabulary.

Another key feature of textbooks is the inclusion of visual aids to convey important information.
Visual aids can be found within the body of the text or in special boxes, sidebars, and appendices. They normally have a title and caption that explain what they are. Each visual aid is often referred to as a “table” or “figure” and numbered to make it easier to find. Sometimes a textbook will have a special table of contents at the beginning of the text just to list all the numbered tables and figures for the reader’s convenience. By paying attention to visual aids, you can learn a lot about the topic that the chapter is covering. Make a note of key visual aids that you want to revisit later when it comes time to study or review information. If you’re having trouble reading and understanding visual aids, check out this video. Finally, after you read make sure to give yourself some time to go over any provided study questions or activities at the end of the chapter. This will help you to monitor your understanding of what you’ve read, deepen your understanding, and help you remember it. It’s also a good idea to create your own study questions and write them on flashcards to help you study later on. Go back to the beginning of the text and review your notes. Create study questions about important theories, facts, people, dates, and terms. To make studying easier, write up your questions and answers on note cards with questions on the front and answers on the back. Use these note cards to help you study. When you’re ready to study for an exam, you should: Review your notes; If provided, review the chapter objectives and outline; Review important information, such as theories, facts, names, dates, and terms; Review any vocabulary flashcards you created; Review your answers to study questions and activities; Review any study questions you created. Remember to give yourself enough time to study before the exam. Don't wait until the last minute! Good luck!

Displayed on screen

Student: Thank you!
Owl: Thanks for listening to this instructional video on Annotating a Textbook!

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