

SQ4R: Getting the Most from Your Textbooks



In high school, readings are typically broken into smaller, neater packages that students can then discuss in class. Lectures and class tend to review the exact material that will be on the exam.

In college, however, many students are challenged when this is no longer the case. Now, having to wrestle meaning from large and dryly written textbooks, many students struggle to identify key points and consolidate the material into helpful study notes.

Wrestle no more, students! SQ4R offers a step-by-step approach to reading that will help you work faster and smarter, helping you to achieve your best at UC!

Step 1: Survey

1. Survey includes scanning the entirety of an assigned chapter or section of text.
2. Note the headings of the section, and briefly read the introductory paragraphs and section summaries, if the book has these. Look over important graphics and captions as well.
3. Come away with a few (less than 10) main ideas and concepts on which the chapter will focus.
4. Spend no more than a few minutes on this step.

Step 2: Question

1. Take each heading and make it into a question.
2. The best questions will call on knowledge you may already have, or puts the heading into dialogue with the other headings or main ideas that you found while “surveying.”

Ex: A heading on “Democracy in England,” might generate the following questions:

“What do I know about Democracy in England?” “How does Democracy in England compare to Democracy in other countries this chapter covers?” “How does Democracy in England differ from those political institutions I have already studied in this class?” “What has the instructor mentioned about Democracy in England?”

Step 3: Read

1. Read the section or chapter while attempting to answer your original questions.
2. Review pictures and captions.
3. Note underlined, bolded, or otherwise highlighted words or phrases.
4. Answer any review questions within the textbook.
5. Do not skim at this point; if something is unclear, slow down and re-read it.

Step 4: Recite

1. After each section, stop reading and review out loud.
2. Answer your original questions, and reread important passages or definitions out loud.
3. Translate the book's words into your own words. Try to summarize each passage heading's main point. Glance over key words and try to provide definitions.
4. Continue to self-test until you feel confident that you can understand and remember the information on your own.

Step 5: Write

1. Once you have proven to yourself that you know and remember the key definitions and main ideas in your own words, write your notes out.
2. Use the structure of the text to create an outline for yourself. Be sure to note definitions, main ideas, and important details in order of the text and in your own words.

Step 6: Review

1. Use these notes to review for your exam. Read them aloud, rewrite them, or quiz yourself as the exam approaches. The more you review, the more ingrained the information will become, and the less you will need to study at the close of the quarter.

Note: SQ4R will only work if you break texts into reasonable sections. Without breaking texts up, students will spend too long attempting to read too much, and will not have the time or stamina to complete each step adequately. Remember, whatever you are reading, you will take it through 6 steps of SQ4R, if you wait and read 6 chapters at once, that will take far too long to accomplish, and you won't be able to fully adopt SQ4R.

Continued Practice

1. Bring your textbook and syllabus to your coaching section. Have the coach complete SQ4R with you on a section of your assigned reading. After the session, continue to break down textbooks in this note taking format and review your efforts with your coach.

