Active Reading, Notetaking, and Highlighting Strategies

Active Reading

Reading is essential in most college courses, and the first stage of the writing process often involves researching and reading. To get the most out of what we read, notetaking and highlighting can be useful tools for readers and writers alike. Effective highlighting and notetaking can aid in understanding texts and can be great tools for cataloging important information that might be relevant to your paper as you incorporate outside research to support your ideas. When reading textbooks or research, we recommend that you read the material or each part of the material three times:

1. The first time you read the text, read it through once uninterrupted to preview the contents and get a feel for the important information in the material. Do not take notes or highlight on your first pass over the material because everything can seem important at first glance, causing you to highlight or note too much.

2. On the second read, you should actively read. Active reading involves critical thinking strategies like asking questions about what you are reading and looking up words or terminology you may not understand. During this pass, take notes and highlight as you will likely have a better idea moving into the second reading about the important information you should emphasize.

3. During the third read, make sure that you understand the material and did not miss important information. You may want to write a summary of the material during this step to ensure that you have a comprehensive understanding of the text.

As you complete the various stages of active reading, the following strategies may aid you in taking strong and useful notes and effectively highlighting the text for emphasis.

Notetaking Strategies

Taking good notes has many benefits for you as a student and writer. It helps keep you focused and engaged when reading actively, allowing you to ask questions and think critically about the text in your notes as you read. Taking notes on class texts can help you prepare for class lecture and discussion by giving you a better understanding of the text as well as a reference to revisit. Strong notes can also be used as a study guide if you will be tested on the material you read. As you read through research, notetaking can help you to record and organize important ideas and information from the source to integrate into your paper. Use the following strategies to boost your notetaking skills:

- **Use notetaking as an opportunity to practice paraphrasing.**
  When taking notes, you should not copy exact words from the text unless you are planning to use them as a direct quote in a paper, and even if you are, highlighting might be a better way to emphasize quotes for future use. Instead, practice paraphrasing in your notes, putting the ideas in your text into your words as you

note important passages and details from your reading. Then you can also use those paraphrased notes to add research to your paper. Remember to cite your source when you include paraphrased material. Even if you are not writing a paper based on what you are reading, extra practice paraphrasing while taking notes on a textbook chapter or other course reading will help build your paraphrasing skills for integrating research into future papers.

- **Choose the notetaking method that works best for the way you learn.**
  Notes should be useful tools for you, not just a list of words you never use again after you take them. Think about how your notes can work best for you. For example, if you are a visual learner, take notes in a more visual way, using diagrams, flow charts, or mind maps to organize and visualize your ideas. To organize your notes, you can use columns or tables to create a catalog of information from your text.

- **Utilize note cards.**
  If you are reading information you need to study later, using index cards to take notes can be a great way to quiz yourself later. You can write terms or topics on the front of the card and definitions, information, or explanations on the back to break the information down into small, more digestible bits. You can also write questions on the front of the note card and the answers on the back to quiz yourself on the information when you study. Note cards can also be helpful when researching to write down quotes or information you want to use in your paper. With that information on note cards, you can lay out the information visually on a table, grouping information into different paper sections or paragraphs to create something that looks like a storyboard for your paper.

Highlighting Strategies

Highlighting your text can be a good way to emphasize important information in your text for future reading of the material, studying, or research. The following strategies can help you highlight your text effectively:

- **Use multiple colors of highlighter to color code your highlighted material for various uses.**
  If you are serious about getting the most out of your highlighting, you might want to invest in several different colors of highlighting to color code your highlighting as you go through your text. Make each color stand for a different thing (e.g., yellow for terms and definitions, pink for important dates or people, green for things you need to look up, purple for quotes you might want to use in a paper, etc.). Using these colors to code your highlighting consistently will make it easier to find information in your text as you review it later because you will know exactly what color to look for.

- **Combine highlighting and annotation.**
  If you are highlighting in one color, use small annotations in the margins of your text to remind yourself why you highlighted something or what you were thinking as you read it for future reference. This strategy might prove helpful if long periods of time elapse between the time you are reading a text and the time you are using the text to study or write your paper.

- **If you find yourself highlighting too much, limit your highlighting to one sentence per paragraph.**
  Even if you are a practiced highlighter, it can be easy to fall into the bad habit of highlighting too much, making it difficult to find the important information in a sea of color. If you see yourself making this mistake, try limiting yourself to highlighting only the most important sentence in the paragraph. Find and highlight the sentence that presents the main idea of the paragraph or includes the most impactful statement.

You can also limit yourself by only highlighting words or phrases rather than whole sentences, emphasizing smaller details for future reference.