

A GUIDE TO READING *THE AMERICAN PEOPLE* IN A READING or DISCUSSION-BASED COURSE

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What do professors expect in classes such as history when they say “Read Chapter 5”?

It depends... on your professor’s teaching style.

If your professor in Historical Understanding is teaching history as a lecture-based course, reading before class to gain an overview and become acquainted with the material may be good enough. For that level of reading, following the recommended steps in #1 below will be a good start. Then you can adjust the amount of time you spend reading after you have experience with the class.

Recommendation: See information on the website for studying in Lecture-Based courses.

However, if your class includes discussion and group work, you will need to read much more thoroughly. Professors with this style of teaching would expect you to do the following:

1. Read and basically understand the material.
2. Be able to identify what is most important to remember.
3. Make notations in the textbook itself so you can find specific information quickly.
4. Identify anything you find confusing and then ask the professor about it in class.

What makes this kind of reading difficult?

- College textbooks often contain more information per page than high school textbooks.
- College textbooks are usually written at a higher reading level than high school texts.

How can I improve my concentration while I read so I remember the information later?

The following strategies will help improve your ability to understand the material, to focus while you read, and to find specific information later for class discussion or papers.

1. Plan ahead before you begin to read intensively.

- Before you begin reading, take about 15 minutes to look over the assigned reading.
- Use the “user-friendly” textbook aids that help you identify key points in the reading.

Look carefully at

- ♦ the introduction, including the introductory case study,
- ♦ the Chapter Outline,
- ♦ headings and subheadings,
- ♦ visual aids as well as the captions underneath [photos, diagrams, maps, etc],
- ♦ the Chapter Conclusion.

This quick overview should give you some general background on the reading plus an idea of how the topics are organized. Before you start to read, you should have a sense of what you need to know when you finish reading the chapter.

2. Decide how much you should “bite off” at a time.

In *The American People*, read one section at a time. Then summarize what you have read.

Note: If you can’t summarize what you have just read, you need to reread!

3. Does the material sound familiar?

Ask yourself: *What do I already know about this material?*

It’s easier to remember if you can “hook” new information to what you already know.

4. IMPORTANT: To improve your concentration, raise a question and read to answer it!

For each heading or subheading, turn the title or heading into one or more questions and read to answer them. For example, in the first chapter of the text, you might raise the following questions: *What was the U.S. like in 1865?* [Note that the author refers to several different areas: political, economic, social. You need to know key points about each.]

Who were “freedpeople”? What were their hopes? Were their hopes realistic? Why was the White South fearful? What kind of responses did they make?

Alert: Be flexible enough to add to or change your question(s) as you read if necessary. If no question comes to mind, ask yourself, “*What do I need to know about this topic?*” or “*What is the point of this section?*” Then make sure you can answer when you are done!

5. Treat the textbook like a workbook so you have a record of what to remember.

Read with a pen in hand so you can make notations as you go. [For example, you might circle such words as “politically” and then underline or number [1,2,3...] key words which describe the political climate.]

Keep in mind that you are marking specific information you will want to find later.

- Underline phrases, not sentences, that answer your questions.
- **Remember, underlining is only a small part of good note taking. Make notations also!** Your notations should make certain items stand out clearly. Be creative!

For example:

 | Underline or bracket particularly important pieces of information

○ Circle specialized vocabulary, dates, names or other specific items

??? Put question marks by confusing information so you can ask about it.

[Bracket long sections that seem really critical to review

NO! “Talk to” the author by identifying points you agree or disagree with

1,2,3... Number items that represent a list of points you want to remember.

6. Push to the end of each section even if you find the material especially difficult.

You can always reread if necessary, but try to get an overview first.

- You should know the meaning of any words in a title or heading before you begin reading! Look up unfamiliar words in titles and headings right away.
- Once you begin reading, if you come across words you don’t know, circle them and push on. Your first goal is to get an overall understanding of the material. Then, when you have completed the section, return to the words you have identified and look them up. You should interrupt your reading to look up a word only if the unfamiliar word prevents you from a general understanding of the material. Remember, specialized terms are usually defined by the author in the reading itself.

7. Check on your understanding as you go!

After each section, test yourself by answering your questions or summarizing 3-4 points you need to remember. If you are unable to do so, you need to reread that section!

How can you make sure you remember what you have just read?

Try one or more of these ways...or develop your own methods:

- Return to each section and answer your questions.
- Summarize each section in your own words.
- Make sure you can explain each item in the Chapter Outline.
- Answer any questions your professor has given you.
- If **dates** seem important in the chapter, make a time line for the chapter and write in important events to remember. [*Tip:* Time lines usually work best when drawn vertically.]
- If **locations** seem important in the chapter, make sure you can locate important places on a map. You may also need to know how one location relates to another.

A note about highlighters:

This final review is an especially good time to use a highlighter. Highlight those items that you are having difficulty remembering so you know to review them more frequently and carefully.