

Cheat Sheet: Reading Strategies

Essential Concepts

Active Reading

- **Reading in college requires active engagement.** Unlike casual reading, academic reading involves thinking critically about the material. You should read in a quiet, focused space, often more than once, and take time to reflect, question, and apply what you're learning.
- **Preview before reading to get the big picture.** Skimming titles, headings, summaries, and visuals helps you anticipate what the text will cover. This prepares your mind to connect new ideas with what you already know and sets a purpose for reading.
- **Use questioning to stay mentally engaged.** Ask yourself questions before, during, and after reading. This helps you clarify your understanding, uncover bias, and form your own opinions about the material.
- **Annotate to process and remember what you read.** Mark up the text by summarizing, asking questions, noting unfamiliar terms, and making connections to other material. Highlighting alone isn't enough—your annotations should reflect your thinking.
- **Summarizing and paraphrasing both involve putting ideas into your own words, but they serve different purposes.** Summarizing condenses the main points of a text into a shorter version, while paraphrasing restates a specific idea or passage in about the same length. Use summaries to capture the big picture, and paraphrasing to clarify or integrate specific details.
- **Outlining and concept mapping help organize and visualize what you've read.** Outlining presents information in a clear, structured format—ideal for identifying main ideas and supporting details in order. Concept mapping uses visuals like diagrams or charts to show how ideas connect, making it easier to understand complex relationships or plan a writing assignment.
- **Review regularly to strengthen retention.** Go back over your notes, summaries, and annotations often. Quiz yourself, use flashcards, and revisit difficult sections to check what you've mastered and where you need more practice.

Specialized Reading Strategies

- **Online reading requires extra focus and intentionality.** To stay engaged, use tools like timers or blockers, preview headings before diving in, and be selective with hyperlinks. Take notes—either digitally or on paper—to stay active while you read.

- **Different subjects require different reading approaches.** For science texts, focus on patterns like classification, processes, and experiments, and pay attention to visuals and vocabulary. For math, work through problems step-by-step with paper and pencil, revisit examples until you can solve them independently, and use each step to build your understanding. In social sciences, look for arguments, evidence, and connections between ideas. Adapting your reading strategies by discipline helps you understand and retain material more effectively.
- **Scholarly articles are dense and discipline-specific, so read them with purpose.** Articles in the humanities follow essay-like structures using MLA or CMS style, while science and social science articles often follow APA format with sections like Methods, Results, and Discussion. Focus on abstracts, headings, and conclusions first, then dig into the details, paying close attention to arguments, evidence, and terminology.
- **Visual aids are part of the text and should be read carefully.** Graphs, charts, tables, diagrams, and maps often contain critical data. Don't skip them—study how they present information and how that supports (or even challenges) the written content.

Rhetorical Context

- **Rhetoric is about making purposeful communication choices.** It's not just about persuasion—it's about how we shape messages depending on our audience, purpose, and situation, whether we're texting a friend or writing an academic essay.
- **Rhetorical context includes five key elements: writer, audience, topic, purpose, and occasion.** Being aware of these factors helps you understand why a message is presented the way it is—and how you should shape your own response.
- **Writers and readers are both influenced by their own rhetorical context.** Just as a writer's background, motives, and audience shape their message, your own goals, assumptions, and setting shape how you interpret and respond.
- **Analyzing rhetorical context reveals bias, motivation, and credibility.** Understanding who the writer is and why they're writing helps you evaluate the argument more critically—and build stronger, more focused responses.

Vocabulary-Building Strategies

- **Context clues help you figure out unfamiliar words without a dictionary.** By paying attention to nearby words or phrases—definitions, synonyms, contrasts, examples, or general context—you can often infer a word's meaning and stay focused while reading.
- **There are different types of context clues, each offering a different way to unlock meaning.** These include definition, synonym, antonym, example, experience-based, and adjacent clues. Recognizing these patterns can make challenging texts more manageable.
- **Structural analysis builds vocabulary by breaking words into parts.** Learning common prefixes, roots, and suffixes—especially from Greek and Latin—helps you decode unfamiliar words across many disciplines, especially in science and medicine.
- **Building your vocabulary takes regular reading, active use, and using available resources.** Read widely to encounter new words in context, and reinforce them by writing, speaking, and

tracking them in a personal word list. Use resources like dictionaries, thesauruses, apps, and browser tools to make word learning part of your everyday routine.

Types of Reading Material

- **Different reading types serve different purposes.** Knowing whether you're reading literature, journalism, academic writing, a textbook, or a reference source helps you understand why you're reading it and how to approach it effectively.
 - **Literature is designed to entertain and provoke thought.** Whether it's fiction, poetry, drama, or creative nonfiction, literature uses artistic language, characters, and plot structures—often following a dramatic arc with exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution.
 - **Journalism focuses on informing with timely, fact-based reporting.** News articles are structured using the inverted pyramid—starting with the most important facts and moving to less critical details—so readers can stop at any point and still grasp the main idea.
 - **Academic journals are written by experts to share new research.** These peer-reviewed articles target readers who already have background knowledge in the subject and often present complex, narrowly focused arguments without simplifying for general audiences.
 - **Textbooks and reference works aim to educate and inform.** Textbooks guide structured learning with examples and exercises, while reference works like dictionaries or encyclopedias help answer specific questions and are organized for quick access to factual information.
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Glossary

active reading

reading with the purpose of understanding, evaluating, and reflecting on a text by actively engaging with its ideas through strategies like questioning, annotating, and summarizing

annotating

an active reading strategy that involves marking up a text with highlights, symbols, notes, and questions to reflect on key ideas, make connections, and deepen understanding while reading

concept mapping

a visual strategy for organizing and connecting main ideas and supporting details using boxes, arrows, and diagrams to help you better understand or plan a topic or text

context clue

a word or phrase found in the same or nearby sentence that helps a reader figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word

dramatic arc

the common structure used in most stories that follows the progression of events from introduction and rising action to climax, falling action, and resolution, helping audiences understand and connect with the narrative

genre

a category or type of writing, speech, or art that follows specific conventions and serves a particular purpose—such as literature, journalism, academic journals, textbooks, or reference works

outlining

a strategy for organizing main ideas and key details in a clear, logical structure that helps you understand, summarize, and plan written or reading material efficiently

paraphrasing

rewriting someone else's ideas in your own words, about the same length as the original, to show understanding and use their ideas alongside your own in your writing

previewing

a pre-reading strategy that involves skimming a text to notice headings, key terms, and summaries in order to get an overview of the content and prepare for deeper understanding

questioning

a reading strategy that involves asking thoughtful questions about a text to better understand the author's ideas, promote critical thinking, and connect the material to your own experiences or knowledge

reading process loop

a flexible, step-by-step approach to reading that includes previewing, questioning, annotating, and reviewing, designed to help you actively engage with and better understand a text by revisiting steps as needed

reviewing

the final step in the reading process that reinforces what you've learned by going back over key ideas and actively recalling information to help it stick in your memory for later use

rhetoric

the art of persuasion through language, including the specific words, tone, and techniques used to effectively communicate a message to a particular audience and purpose

rhetorical context

the combination of factors that shape a message—such as the writer, audience, topic, purpose, and occasion—which influence how communication is created, delivered, and understood

scholarly article

an in-depth, research-based article written by experts for other professionals in a specific field, often peer-reviewed, and published in academic journals that follow formal standards for structure, citations, and objectivity

structural analysis

the process of breaking a word into its parts—such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes—to figure out its meaning and improve vocabulary understanding

summarizing

putting the main ideas of someone else's work into your own words in a much shorter form to show you understand the text and to highlight the most important points

visual aid

an image, graphic, or chart used to display information in a clear and organized way, often supporting or expanding on the ideas presented in the surrounding text