

On Course

Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life

Seventh Edition

SKIP DOWNING

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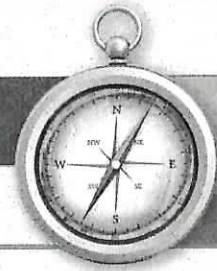
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Wise Choices in College

READING



The first step in the CORE Learning System is **Collecting** knowledge, and one of the most important ways you'll **Collect** knowledge in college is by reading. During your studies you can expect to read many thousands of pages. You'll read textbooks, reference books, journals, handouts, Web pages, and more. Most of the tests you'll take will be based on your reading. And so will the essays and research papers you'll write. Obviously, then, reading is one of the most important skills you can have for success in college.

Sadly, according to American College Testing (ACT), many college-bound students lack this skill. Nearly half of the 1.2 million students who recently took the ACT college entrance test scored low in reading. This is bad news for those students. According to the ACT, the ability to read and understand complex texts is the skill that separates students who are ready for college from those who are not. And because of all of the reading that is required in college, even students with good reading skills will benefit from becoming more accomplished.

The learning strategies you'll encounter in this chapter have one thing in common: the ability to cure **mindless reading**. Mindless reading is the act of running your eyes over a page only to realize you don't recall a thing you read. The opposite of mindless reading is **active reading**. Active reading is characterized by intense mental engagement in what you are reading. This highly focused involvement leads to significant neural activity in your brain, assists deep and lasting learning, and (good news for students) leads to high grades.

READING: THE BIG PICTURE

When reading mindfully, you are actively **Collecting** key concepts, ideas (main and secondary)

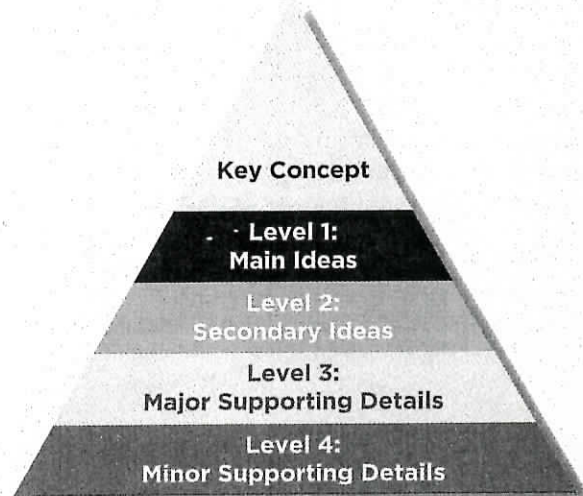


Figure 2.2

and supporting details (major and minor). When placed by levels of significance, information you read looks like Figure 2.2.

A **key concept** is the main topic you are reading about. Examples of key concepts include *inflation*, *mitosis*, *World War II*, or *symbolic interactionism*.

Ideas that expand on concepts are divided into main and secondary ideas. A **main idea** (sometimes called a “thesis”) is the most important idea the author wants to convey about a key concept. Two authors may write about the same key concept but present different main ideas. For example, they may both write about *inflation* but disagree about its cause. One might say, “The primary cause of inflation is war.” The other may say, “The rising cost of production is the main cause of inflation.”

A **secondary idea** (sometimes called a “topic sentence”) elaborates on a main idea by answering questions that readers may have about it. For example,

one question about inflation might be, “What effect do taxes have on rising costs?” Another might be “How do labor unions affect the cost of production?”

Each idea—main or secondary—is typically followed by **supporting details** such as examples, evidence, explanation, and experiences.

To illustrate the relationship of levels, imagine that your instructor asks your class the following. “In Chapter 2 of *On Course*, a key concept is personal responsibility. What is the main idea about it?” (Pause for a moment and decide how you would answer, because how well you answer provides feedback about your present reading abilities.)

Imagine one of your classmates replying, “The main idea in the second chapter of *On Course* is that personal responsibility is an important inner quality for creating academic, professional, and personal success.”

“Well, done,” your instructor says, “and what are some of the secondary ideas?”

Another student answers, “When we are being responsible we respond to life’s challenges as Creators not as Victims. Another secondary idea is that our inner conversations affect whether or not we make responsible choices. And a third idea is that using a decision-making model called the Wise Choice Process helps us make responsible choices.”

“Excellent,” your instructor enthuses. “You’ve demonstrated you understand some of the important ideas of the chapter. Now, someone please elaborate on the Wise Choice Process.” In response, a third student *explains* the six steps of the Wise Choice Process and then gives an *example* of how she used it to make a recent decision. By elaborating, she offers supporting details that answer the questions a thoughtful reader would have about the Wise Choice Process, such as “What is it and how can it be used?”

So as you look at the following learning strategies, keep in mind the big picture of reading: **Your goal is to Collect key concepts, important ideas, and supporting details.**

BEFORE READING

1. Approach reading with a positive attitude. Attitude is the foundation of your success because it influences the choices you make. Nowhere is this truer than in reading. Do you have negative attitudes about reading in general or reading specific subjects? Or do you harbor doubts about your ability to understand what you read? Do you think of any of your reading assignments as beyond your understanding, boring, worthless, or stupid? If so, replace negative attitudes with positive ones. Realize that reading offers you access to the entire recorded knowledge of the human race. With effective reading skills, you can learn virtually any information or skill you need in order to improve your life, but only if you approach each reading assignment with a positive attitude.

2. Create a distributed reading schedule. A marathon reading session before an exam is seldom helpful. Instead, spread many shorter sessions over an entire course. For example, plan to finish your 450-page history text by reading 30 to 40 pages each week. You can easily reach that goal by reading just five or six pages a day. A distributed schedule like this keeps you current with your assignments, helps you concentrate for your entire reading session, and increases how much you recall from what you read.

3. Review past readings. As a warm-up before you read, glance at pages you have previously read. Look at chapter titles and text headings to jog your memory and prepare for what you are about to read. Review any marks or comments you made when you read earlier assignments (see Strategy 11). Look over any notes you took (see Strategy 12). Reviewing like this takes advantage of one of the three principles of deep and lasting learning: prior learning. When you connect what you are reading now to previously stored information (i.e., already-formed neural networks), you learn the new information or skill faster and more deeply.

4. Preview before reading. Like observing a valley from a high mountain, previewing a reading assignment provides the big picture of what’s to come. You’ll see the important ideas and their organization, which increases understanding when you read.

At the beginning of a course, it's wise to preview the entire book. Most of the time, however, you'll be previewing a single chapter. Thumb through the pages, taking in chapter titles, chapter objectives, focus questions, text headings, charts, graphs, illustrations, previews, and summaries. Note any words that are specially formatted, such as with CAPITALS, bold, italics, and so on. In just a few minutes, you will have a helpful overview of what you are about to read. A chapter preview should take no longer than five minutes and include a quick look at some or all of the following features:

- **Table of Contents:** The fastest way to preview is to look at the table of contents because it provides an outline of your entire reading (for an example, see the table of contexts of this book on pages vii–xiv).
- **Chapter Objectives or Focus Questions:** Usually placed at the beginning of a chapter, these features identify what you can expect to learn from the chapter. Each section in *On Course* starts with one or more Focus Questions.
- **Chapter Titles and Headings:** Thumb through the pages you're about to read, and note the titles and headings. They provide a helpful overview of the topics you'll be reading about. For example, here are three levels of information presented in Chapter 2 of *On Course*:
 - Accepting Personal Responsibility
 - Adopting a Creator Mindset
 - Victim and Creator Mindsets
 - Responsibility and Culture
 - Responsibility and Choice
- **Special Formatting:** Words in CAPITALS, bold, italics, or color put a spotlight on key concepts and ideas. When you see special formatting, you can be confident the author is giving you a hint: *This is important information!* A common use of specially formatted text is to call attention to special vocabulary. That is why **Creator mindset** and **Victim mindset** were bolded earlier in this chapter.

- **Visual Elements:** Charts, graphs, illustrations, cartoons, photographs, and diagrams are included to reinforce concepts in the text and improve readers' understanding. For example, the two drawings on page 22 illustrate how learning changes neurons in the brain. Captions for visual elements usually explain their significance.
- **Chapter Summaries:** Many college texts provide a summary at the end of a chapter. This summary typically identifies the important ideas in the chapter.

While it's taken quite a few words to describe these six options for previewing a reading assignment, once you get skilled, previewing will take you only a few minutes to do.

5. Identify the purpose of what you're reading.

To keep the big picture in mind, ask yourself, "What's the point of what I'm about to read?" For example, the "point" of every section of *On Course* is to present empowering beliefs and behaviors that you can add to your toolbox for success in college and in life. By keeping this purpose in mind as you read, you program yourself to **Collect** the most important ideas. The purpose of what you are reading at this moment is to identify strategies that may help you improve your reading comprehension and speed.

6. Create a list of questions. Create a list of questions. If the author provides focus questions, use them to start this list. Next, turn chapter titles or section headings into questions. For example, if the heading in a computer book reads "HTML Tags," turn this heading into one or more questions: *What is an HTML tag? How are HTML tags created?* If you see questions within the text, add them to your list. The process of reading for answers to questions, especially those you're really curious about, heightens your concentration, increases your active involvement, and improves your understanding.

WHILE READING

7. Read in chunks. Poor readers read one word at a time. Good readers don't read words; they read ideas, and ideas are found in groups of words, or

chunks. For example, in the following sentence, try reading all of the words between the diamonds at once:

◆ If you read ◆ in chunks ◆ you will increase ◆ your speed ◆ and your comprehension. ◆

Like any new habit, this method will initially feel awkward. However, as you practice you'll find you can take in bigger chunks of information at increasingly faster rates of speed, like this:

◆ If you read in chunks ◆ you will increase your speed ◆ and your comprehension. ◆

Since much of your reading time occurs while you pause to take in words (called a "fixation"), the fewer times you pause, the faster you can read. In addition to taking in larger chunks of information, you can nudge yourself even faster by moving your fingers along the line of text as a speed regulator. As you get practiced at taking in more words in one fixation, you can increase the speed of your fingers and read even faster.

8. Concentrate on reading faster. In one experiment, students increased their reading speed up to 50 percent simply by concentrating on reading as fast as they could while still understanding what they were reading. You, too, can probably read faster by just *deciding* to.

9. Pause to recite. Have you ever finished reading an assignment only to realize you have no idea what you just read? Here's a remedy. Stop at the end of each section and summarize aloud what you understand to be the main ideas and supporting details. The more difficult the reading, the more often you'll want to pause to recite. Each recitation will give you instant feedback about how well you understand the author's ideas. When you can't smoothly recite the essence of what you have read, go back and read the passage again. Try reading aloud the words you have underlined or highlighted. Keep working actively with the ideas until you understand them completely.

10. Read for answers to questions on your list.

If you've created a list of questions (Strategy 6), now is the time to cash in on that effort. For example, suppose you're about to read a chapter in your accounting book titled "The Double-Entry Accounting System." On your list of questions, you've written "What is a double-entry accounting system?" As you read the chapter, look for and underline the answer. Then write the question in the margin alongside. If you finish your reading assignment and still have unanswered questions on your list, ask your instructor for answers during class or office hours.

11. Mark and annotate your text. As you read, keep asking yourself: *What's the key concept . . . what are the main ideas about the concept . . . and what support is offered?* Identifying main and supporting ideas is usually easier after you've read a whole paragraph, or even a whole section. Once you decide what's important, underline or highlight these ideas in your book. As a guideline, mark only 10 to 15 percent of your text, selecting only what is truly important. Additionally, annotate what you read. To *annotate* means to add comments. Writing your own comments in the open spaces on each page helps you minimize mindless reading and maximize your understanding. Annotations could include summaries in your own words, diagrams, or questions for which you want answers. Later, when creating study materials, your marks and annotations will help you continue **Collecting** the most important ideas to learn.

12. Take notes. Many strategies exist for **Collecting** ideas from textbooks by taking notes in a separate binder or computer file, and in future chapters you'll learn a number of nifty strategies for doing just that. However, there is one option that is particularly suited for taking notes while reading a text, so we'll look at it here. Start by writing the chapter title at the top of your note page or computer file (this is usually the key concept). Beneath the chapter title, copy the first main heading from

the chapter, thus recording a level 1 main idea. Add any subheadings from your book below the main heading, indenting a few more spaces to the right, thus recording level 2 secondary ideas). Here's what this would look like for Chapter 2 of *On Course*:

Structure	Example
Key Concept	Accepting Personal Responsibility
—Level 1 Main Idea	—Adopting a Creator Mindset
—Level 2 Secondary Idea	—Victim and Creator Mindsets
—Level 2 Secondary Idea	—Responsibility and Culture
—Level 2 Secondary Idea	—Responsibility and Choice
—Level 1 Main Idea	—Mastering Creator Language
—Level 2 Secondary Idea	—Self-Talk
—Level 2 Secondary Idea	—The Language of Responsibility
—Level 1 Main Idea	—Making Wise Decisions
—Level 2 Secondary Idea	—The Wise Choice Process

13. Look up the definition of key words. Use a dictionary when you don't know the meaning of a key word. Consider starting a vocabulary list in your journal. Or create a deck of index cards with new words on one side and definitions on the other. Online dictionaries, like Merriam-Webster's (<http://www.m-w.com>), offer an option that lets you hear the correct pronunciation of a word. Use your new words in conversations to lock them in your memory. Developing an extensive and eloquent vocabulary is a great success strategy. In case you want to set some goals for the size of your vocabulary, linguist David Crystal estimates that the average college graduate has an active vocabulary of 60,000 words and the ability to recognize an additional 75,000.

14. Read critically. Not all ideas in print are true. Learn to read critically by being a healthy skeptic. Look for red flags that may suggest a credibility problem. Who is the author? What are the author's credentials? What assumptions does the

author hold? Does the author stand to gain (e.g., money, status, revenge) by your acceptance of his or her opinion? Are the facts accurate and relevant? Is the evidence sufficient? Are the author's positions developed with logic or only strong emotions? Are sources of information identified? Are they believable? Are they current? Are various sides of an issue presented, or only one? Given that anyone can post information on the Internet, reading critically is especially important when assessing information that you encounter online. You'll learn more about how to be a critical thinker in Chapter 7.

AFTER READING

15. Reflect on what you read. Upon finishing a reading assignment, lean back, close your eyes, and ask yourself questions that will help you see the big picture. For example . . .

- What are the key concepts?
- What are the main ideas about those concepts?
- What are the supporting details?
- What do I personally think and feel about the author's main ideas and supporting details?

16. Reread difficult passages. On occasion, every reader needs to revisit difficult passages to understand them fully. I recall one author whose writing made me feel like a dunce. However, somewhere around my fifth or sixth reading (and using strategies in this section), a light went on in my brain and I thought, "Oh . . . so that's what he means! That's not nearly as complicated as I thought!" Trust that by using the strategies presented here, you can comprehend any reading assignment if you stick with it long enough.

17. Recite the marked text. Read aloud the parts of the text you have underlined or highlighted. Attempt to blend the ideas into a flowing statement by adding connecting words between the words in your text. In effect, you'll be summarizing the key points of the material you just read.

18. Talk about what you read. Explain the main ideas and supporting details. Especially helpful is having this conversation with another student in your class who has read the same assignment. This study partner can give you feedback on where you may have misunderstood or left out something important.

19. Read another book on the same subject. Sometimes another author will express the same ideas more clearly. Ask your instructor or a librarian to suggest other readings. Or try a book on the same topic written for children. A book for younger learners may provide just the information

or explanation you need to make sense of your college textbook.

20. Seek assistance. Still having problems understanding what you read? Ask your instructor to explain muddy points. Or see if your college has a reading lab or a tutoring center. For some subjects—such as math, science, and foreign languages—there may be dedicated personnel to help. If all else fails, see if your college has a diagnostician who can test you for a possible learning disability. Such a specialist may be able to help you improve your reading skills.

READING EXERCISE

Choose your most challenging textbook and rate your present comprehension of its content on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 indicating a deep and lasting understanding of what you read). Over the next week, apply new reading strategies when you read this challenging text. At the end of the week, again rate your understanding of the book on the 1-to-10 scale. Be prepared to explain why you think your rating went up, down, or stayed the same. In particular, is there one reading strategy that was most helpful in your quest to read this challenging text with greater comprehension?