Textbook Reading

What often happens when a typical Wabash student starts to read those four chapters assigned for class? He intends to start reading at 7:00 p.m., but when it's time to get to work, he make a quick call to a friend (6 minutes), goes to get an apple (4 minutes), stops to see another friend as he walks past his room (6 minutes), and finally gets back to his room only to discover that he can't find his textbook. It's 7:30 p.m., and he hasn't read a word yet! Then he starts reading and quickly tunes out. He continues to read, but his mind is constantly wandering. Each time he catches himself drifting off, he has to flip back a page or two to find where to start reading again.

This situation reflects two common problems students encounter when reading textbooks: ***procrastination and short attention span***.

Many Wabash students are surprised at the amount of reading required in their classes. A group of freshmen in their second week of classes was discussing the amount of reading, and one student said that he had already had to do more reading in the first 10 days at Wabash as he did in his whole senior year in high school, and another student quickly added that he had done more in those 10 days than he had done in his entire high school career!! It is doubtful that the second student is correct, but the amount of reading required is probably one of the biggest differences between high school and college.

There are methods to read college reading material, which can promote understanding, facilitate study for exams, and at the same time increase our efficiency. They come under a number of different names: Power Reading, Active Reading, Muscle Reading —but they all use basically the same principle, and the one which is most widely recommended is the ***SQ3R Reading Method***.

At first you may think that using a system like SQ3R takes more time. And that may well be true in the beginning until you get use to it. But in the long run, it will save you time.

SQ3R — ***S stands for Survey*** — this is very important for a number of reasons, but most significantly it lets you see an overview of the reading assignment, and this in turn will improve your ability to concentrate as you read. This only should take about five minutes.

The second thing you should do is ***Question:*** Ask yourself, "What are the main points that the author is trying to tell me?" Then look at the headings and sub-headings, and convert them into questions. Actually write these questions in the margins, which brings us to an important point — ***use your textbooks***. They are expensive, but when you think about the cost of textbooks compared to the total cost of your education, the cost of the textbooks is pretty insignificant. So use them. If you do intend to sell back your books when the courses are over, you should know that marking them up does not change the value of the book in terms of resale. What the bookstore will pay you for a book is determined by the national need for that particular book, not whether or not it has been highlighted and written in. And don't forget, you really shouldn't sell any textbooks from your intended major — you are going to have to take comps in your senior year, and it is much easier to review in a

book with which you are familiar. Also, if you go on to grad school, you will be surprised at how many times you will wish you had your undergraduate texts available.

If you don't mark in your books, then when you get ready to study for tests, you are faced with a clear page, which means you essentially have to start over from square one. It's like you never read the material before.

Now you are ready to ***Read*** the material carefully. And when you read, it should be an active, not a passive activity. Underline or highlight, but do this selectively. Write in the margin when you find a main idea or important point. And do it in your own words. Changing written text into your own words is the best way to remember it.

Stop at appropriate intervals (studies show that most beginning college freshmen can only concentrate on difficult reading for five minutes at a time, so you may want these stops to come fairly often). The length of time that you can concentrate will vary with the difficulty of the reading material. Be aware of how long you can read before your mind starts to wander, and use this information to your advantage. Stop at that point and ***Recite*** what you have just read. If you can't put into your own words what you just read, then you may have to go back and reread that part.

Finally the last step is ***Review***. And this shouldn't happen only right before an exam. Review periodically, looking back at your margin notes, and the main points that you have highlighted or underlined. Remember, studies show that information is more likely to be stored in your long-term memory if you review material shortly after you learn it. Some people find that it is helpful to review a chapter before they start reading the new assignment. This is especially true in courses that build on previously learned material, like science courses.

If you are concerned about either your reading speed or your comprehension, please stop by Academic Support Services for individual help. Improving your reading skills is something that will pay great dividends throughout your college career.