



British International School Riyadh

The art of reading a textbook

The best way of reading a textbook is to anticipate what might be in it, writes Harriet Swain

There are many aspects of university life that [students](#) approach with eager anticipation, but reading a textbook is rarely one of them.

This is a shame, because the best way of reading a textbook effectively is to anticipate what might be in it. Plunging straight in to chapter one and racing to the end while mentally planning more interesting things to do once it's all over will not deliver its full value.

Instead, you need to spend time thinking about what you are going to read. Start with the title. This should give you an indication of what it's about. Then read the blurb at the back, and the contents. What about the preface? And the introduction? The conclusion? If you still haven't a clue what the book's about, you need to concentrate more in lectures, or you have picked up your flatmate's book by mistake.

Next, check the name of the author, and find a biography – online if necessary. Have you heard the name before? Is it, in fact, your course leader? Is the author likely to know what he or she is talking about? Do you know of any unusual obsessions or prejudices – ideally, any related to the subject of the book?

Now, when was it written? Look at the publication date. Is it an economics textbook written in 2007? Or a book on America's relations with Islam written in 2000? If so, you may need to supplement it with something more up to date.

If possible, track down a review. Sometimes the reviewer will say: "This book makes no sense at all and is clearly written by an idiot," which can be reassuring, unless the author is your course leader.

Why are you reading it? If it's because your teacher told you to, why did they pick this one (unless they wrote it)? Then think about what you want to get out of it. If you need particular information, consider the structure of the book and work out where you are most likely to find it. Keep a lookout for key sentences and words. That way you'll be able to avoid ploughing through the whole thing.

If you manage to get to the conclusion, don't conclude that you can avoid ever having to think about the book again. Instead, you should summarise its main arguments, and decide how far you agree with them. Unfortunately, reading one textbook is never enough. You'll have to anticipate reading several more.