

Education

Your window to the world of learning

Studying techniques for academic success

BETTER PREPARED Studying is so much more than just skimming the content. It involves understanding, questioning and reviewing the material for favourable outcomes, writes **V Pradeep Kumar**

Recently, I encountered certain problems of students who had just joined a management programme and were loaded with numerous courses. Teaching a business communication course, I posed the following questions to them:

- Do you concentrate on the meaning or just words?
- Do you read the preface, contents and introduction in the book?
- Do you see the relation between sentences, headings, subheadings and topics?
- Do you read the summary at the end of a chapter before the actual content?

The answers indicated a lack of understanding and practice of studying and basic memory techniques. In the absence of a systematic approach to studying, it was just impossible for them to comprehend all that was being taught. So, what's the right studying and memory technique and how does one adopt it? Here's how:

Training your eyes

We see the text in front of us through our eyes, after which our mind absorbs the meaning. Reading technique therefore, revolves around training the eyes first. Here you have to focus on:

- increasing the eye span or number of words you can grasp in one glance.
- reducing the number of times your eyes regress or reread.
- getting a more rhythmical and regular way of moving the eyes.

But studying is so much more than just increasing the eye span. It's also about training your mind, as the familiarity and passion with the subject increases the speed of comprehension. For example, if you were familiar with a subject like chemistry or a game like football, you would have no trouble understanding a chapter or an article about it. The inherent intelligence in you has nothing to do with reading techniques, which could still be faulty. A universally accepted method of efficient reading technique is called SQ3R or Survey; Questioning, Reading, Restating and Reviewing.

Surveying

Surveying is like getting an aerial view of a hill before you start trekking. Surveying in reading means understanding the gist of the reading material or a chapter, before actually getting down to in-depth reading. Here are some helpful pointers:

- Survey the chapter by reading the first paragraph and then the last.
- Read the first sentence of paragraphs in between the first and last paragraph.
- Notice long paragraphs, subheadings, words in italics, diagrams and tables.
- Notice 'signpost' words like firstly, secondly, especially in summaries.



- Notice words asking you to speed up like also, along the same lines, likewise, further, in addition etc.

- Notice words asking you to slow down like but, on the other hand, although, despite, however etc.

- Notice words highlighting the main point like thus, therefore, consequently, accordingly. The total time spent on surveying can be 10 per cent of total time.

Questioning

Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein — three of our greatest thinkers had one commonality; questions of purpose, relevance and interpretation, powered their critical thinking and intellect. The ability to ask questions is a critical component of effective reading and gaining insight. Some key questions to ask can be as below:

- What does the chapter indicate about the contents?
- What do I think will be in it?
- What do I think will not be there?

By raising questions in our mind continually from the title and headings, we get proper mental position for reading. We read and remember best, when we read to answer our questions. The total time to be spent on questioning can be 10 per cent of total time.

Reading

Read difficult matter slowly, light matter quickly and provocative, argumentative, conceptual matter cautiously. Look for the main thoughts and important details. There could be just a single idea under a mountain of words in a long paragraph or

a page. The total time to be spent on reading can be 50 per cent of total time.

Restating

After reading a main heading or a chapter, keep your book down at intervals and read aloud what you have read, especially the main points and important details — the keys to solid learning. As per research, a reader who restates can remember three times better than the one who doesn't and hence improves his memory greatly. The total time to be spent on restating can be 20 per cent of total time.

Reviewing

To review, skim back over the material, surveying the headings again, answering your questions, rereading items you are doubtful about or can't remember and restating the central message with its parts and their relations. Reviewing increases your understanding and confidence. By skimming over the matter again, you can assess whether you deserve a distinction or discover weaknesses. Reviewing is like marking your examination paper and discovering the gap as compared to your examination goals. The total time on reviewing can be 10 per cent of the total time.

The science behind memory

Have you ever thought about what's memory and how do some students recall information instantly while others struggle? When you first learn, information is processed into the brain to form a neural trace. This trace first enters your sensory memory, and then, if you're paying attention, to your Short Term Memory or

STM. This means in a lecture, the information can get straight into your STM if you are paying attention. Further, if you review the chapter or subject later at home, it then moves to your Long Term Memory or LTM. The information processed into your LTM is more or less permanent; with occasional reviewing you will not forget it. The trick is to adopt the information into your LTM as quickly as possible. Your STM has a small capacity and a short duration; you may learn something very quickly, but in 24 hours you will lose 80 per cent of that information.

For an easy start, here are some tips for enhanced learning:

- Stick to a routine and efficient study schedule.
- Study in a quiet environment.
- Take short breaks periodically.
- Keep asking questions about the material as you study it.
- Before lectures, look over the notes of the previous lecture and read the course material pertaining to the lecture.
- Focus on the instructor through listening and taking notes.
- Tougher subjects and those with lower interest must be studied when you feel fresh and are in a good mood.
- Practice *bhramari pranayama* 2-3 times a day. It helps increase concentration and memory, relieving you of tension and anxiety.

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