

CRITICAL (EFFECTIVE) READING STRATEGIES

Effective reading is a very important skill to have as you enter the PTA program. There is a lot of material to cover and the better you are at reading and understanding what you are reading the more successful you will be.

- What does it mean to be an effective critical reader?
- Is this the same as just being a “good” reader?

You certainly need to be able to get through the material, so it does mean that you need to be able to read relatively well. It also means that you must be able to understand what you are reading. To understand, you must use active learning and be able to think about and discuss what you are reading. It involves the ability to ask questions about what you are reading.

This handout is presented to help you understand some basic critical reading strategies. These are strategies that you can make a habit of and apply not only to the reading selections in this class, but also to your professional reading as you leave the program. Reading should not stop as you finish school; it really is only beginning if you desire to remain current and effective in the profession of physical therapy. Although mastering these strategies will not make the critical reading process an easy one, it can make reading much more satisfying and productive and thus help you handle difficult material well and with confidence. The better you read the material, the less you will feel like you need to CRAM before exams! CRAMMING is not effective learning. Because there is so much material it is really important that you really learn it as you go, there is simply not enough time to CRAM before exams, especially the licensure exam that you will take upon successful completion of the program.

Fundamental to each of these strategies is taking notes (annotating) as you read. Text books are not only made to read, they are also made to write on! Most, if not all, of your text books will be reference books for you for years to come. Annotating (note-taking) directly on the page includes: underlining key words, phrases, or sentences; writing comments or questions in the margins; bracketing important sections of the text; constructing ideas with lines or arrows; numbering related points in sequence; and making note of anything that strikes you as interesting, important, or raises a question. This may begin simple with a pencil and highlighter, then add further annotations on second and third readings.

The following are critical reading strategies:

- 1. Preview:** *Learn about a text before really reading it.*
Scan the reading assignment. Previewing helps you to get a sense of what the text is about and how it is organized before reading it closely. This simple strategy includes seeing what you can learn from the outline or other introductory material, skimming to get an overview of the content and organization. Most reading you will do comes from textbooks that have outlines with bolded titles and subtitles with excellent organization. Look over the chapter and see the “outline” first. If there is no clear outline, then develop one as you read. Identify unfamiliar words then check the meaning later. If they seem to be key words, i.e., if the author uses them more than once, scribble a brief definition at the bottom of the page or at the end of the reading.
- 2. Put the reading in Context:** *What does this mean to you?*
Now read the text. When you read a text (or anything else), you read it through the eyes of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is informed by what you have come to know or have experienced. Review the learning outcomes for the class/unit the reading was assigned. As you read apply this to what you already know and check your understanding of words. If you have limited experience your understanding will also be limited. You will need to spend time looking up words that you are not familiar. After you think about the context, prepare to discuss this with others as well as on the discussion boards.

- 3. Questioning to understand and remember:** *Ask questions about the content.*
As students, you should be used to teachers asking you questions about your reading. These questions are designed to help you understand a reading and respond to it more fully, and often this technique works. You need to develop the skill of “question asking” of yourself. When you need to understand and use new information though it is most beneficial if you write the questions, as you read the text for the first time. With this strategy, you can write questions any time, but in difficult academic readings, you will understand the material better and remember it longer if you write a question for every paragraph or brief section. Each question should focus on a main idea, not on illustrations or details, and each should be expressed in your own words, not just copied from parts of the paragraph.
- 4. Reflecting on challenges to your beliefs and values:**
The reading that you do for a class might challenge your attitudes, your unconsciously held beliefs, or your positions on current issues. As you read a text for the first time, mark in the margin each time you feel a personal challenge to your understanding, attitudes, or beliefs. Make a brief note in the margin.
- 5. Outlining and summarizing:** *Identifying the main ideas and restate them in your own words. Think about how you would respond if you were asked, “What do you think this means?”*
Outlining and summarizing are especially helpful strategies for understanding the content and structure of a reading selection. Whereas outlining reveals the basic structure of the text, summarizing synthesizes a selection's main argument in brief. Outlining may be part of the annotating process, or it may be done separately (as it is in this class). The key to both outlining and summarizing is being able to distinguish between the main ideas and the supporting ideas and examples. The main ideas form the backbone, the strand that holds the various parts and pieces of the text together. Outlining the main ideas helps you to discover this structure. When you make an outline, don't use the text's exact words. Summarizing begins with outlining, but instead of merely listing the main ideas, a summary recomposes them to form a new text. Whereas outlining depends on a close analysis of each paragraph, summarizing also requires creative synthesis. Putting ideas together again -- **in your own words and in a condensed form** -- shows how reading critically can lead to deeper understanding of any text.
- 6. Evaluating an argument:** *Test the logic of what you are reading.*
All writers make assertions that want you to accept as true. As a critical reader, you should not accept anything on face value but to recognize every assertion as an argument that must be carefully evaluated. An argument has two essential parts: a claim and support. The claim asserts a conclusion -- an idea, an opinion, a judgment, or a point of view -- that the writer wants you to accept. The support includes reasons (shared beliefs, assumptions, and values) and evidence (facts, examples, statistics, and authorities) that give readers the basis for accepting the conclusion. When you assess an argument, you are concerned with the process of reasoning as well as its truthfulness (these are not the same thing). At the most basic level, in order for an argument to be acceptable, the support must be appropriate to the claim and the statements must be consistent with one another.
Often we must begin by learning basic facts about a subject. You will be asked to learn facts and may be told, “This is just the way it is!” or “This is the way it has always been.” Unfortunately, we must accept many basic foundational facts that will be used to build our knowledge. This does not mean that you should not ask questions about a particular set of facts, but you may not be satisfied with the answer all of the time.
- 7. Comparing and contrasting related readings:** *Explore the similarities and differences between reading assignments to understand them better.*
You will read more than one author on many subjects we must cover. Often there is more than one right way or one source of information. When you read two or more different texts that are concerned with the same issue(s), you should question and compare.