Getting Started: The BCA’s of Successful Study

Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing.

Abraham Lincoln

The BCA’s of Success

- Doing things *Before* to concentrate, be selective
- Staying Connected while reading, listening, studying
- Doing things *After* to consolidate, remember

Most students who use this book are enrolled in a college course on improving reading and study strategies. Many are, at the same time, enrolled in other courses that require textbook reading, note taking, studying, and preparing for exams. If you are one of these students, you may feel frustrated and anxious to get to the parts of *Developing Textbook Thinking* that will help you most in your other courses. From years of helping students develop reading and study strategies, we share your frustration. We wish we could give you all the strategies and tools you need on the first day so you can use them in your other courses.

It is not possible to give detailed strategies and tools immediately. However, a chapter that gives you some tips for getting on the right track will help you in all your courses. We will cover these strategies in detail later in the book, and we will talk about and give you practice in other strategies as well.
Developing Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is a critical element. This means disciplining yourself so that you study regularly, keep up with assignments, and continue working toward your long-range goals—to be successful in college. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss this in some detail, but to get you started, here are some tips:

- Write out your goals for each course you are taking. Include your personal goals: What do I want to get out of the course? What grade do I want to earn? Include any scheduled tests and assignments, along with their due dates. You now have a framework for deciding how you have to discipline yourself.

- Think about when and how you concentrate best. Do you concentrate best in the morning, afternoon, or night? How long can you read and concentrate at a time? Does background music help you or hinder you?

- Make a weekly schedule for your courses. How much study time per week do you estimate you will need to meet your goals? When will you do your studying? Base your study times on when, and for how long, you think you can concentrate best. Block out the time you need. Block out school-related time before scheduling time for fun and relaxation. Most important, make a commitment to yourself that you will make studying a priority, that you will not let other distractions interfere with that study time.

Learning Flexibility

Flexibility is critical. You will have too large a workload if you are not efficient in studying and doing the work. The key to efficiency is flexibility. Chapters 8 through 12 discuss this in some detail, but here are some tips:

- Think about your background knowledge and interest: If you already know a lot about the topic, you will not need to spend as much time as you would on a topic that is unfamiliar. Then, before you begin to study, decide how much time you should invest.

- Learn and try different strategies. If you find you are not successful in studying something, try a different approach; a number of strategies are presented throughout this book to help you.

- Make strategies your own. That is, modify strategies to meet the needs of the courses you are taking and your own studying preferences.

Understanding the Task

In order to be flexible and know what study strategies to use, you need to think about what is expected of you. This includes understanding some of the key characteristics of the subject area and textbook you are studying. Differences among types of textbooks are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, but here are some tips:
ters. Additionally, sometimes assistance is available from a Web site for a particular course. Your adviser or your instructor should be able to point you toward the services available on your campus. Usually these services are free of charge.

**Using Your Course Syllabus**

The last tip to use before you read, listen, and study has to do with using and understanding course syllabi (*syllabi* is the plural of *syllabus*). In high school, most teachers do not distribute a course syllabus, so many first-year college students are not familiar with the nature and purpose of a syllabus. In a sense, the course syllabus is a contract between you and your instructor. It generally outlines what the professor expects of you both in and out of the classroom. Most syllabi indicate what you should be responsible for in terms of reading the text, when tests will be given, how grades will be determined, and any specific policies that instructors might have in terms of absences, test retakes, and academic dishonesty.

Many professors feel that once they have given the syllabus to you it becomes your job to keep abreast of the requirements. For example, few professors will remind you of weekly reading assignments once they have distributed the syllabus. Most will still remind you of test dates and study sessions and when major requirements such as term papers are due. However, some do not. Refer to your syllabus throughout the course to make sure you are on top of assignments, readings, and tests. Many times, the syllabus and other information are also posted on the course Web site. If so, you should check it periodically—both to review the expectations and to see if there are new assignments or information posted. The final warning here is to read the syllabus carefully and make sure that you understand the expectations. Ignorance of the law is no excuse!

**Following Effective Strategies**

**Before You Read**

The study techniques in this book include strategies to use *before* you read the text, listen to the lecture, or prepare for the test. These strategies are based on four principles of learning (discussed in more detail in Chapter 8). To be most efficient and effective, use the following principles:

1. **Principle 1**: Psyche yourself up.
2. **Principle 2**: Use what you already know about the topic to help you.
3. **Principle 3**: Purposely intend to remember what you read or hear.
4. **Principle 4**: Anticipate test questions as a way to decide when and how to take notes or on what to concentrate most.
points. The more you can actively do something with information, the more the material will belong to you so that you will understand and remember it.

- **Think critically.** As you are reading or listening to lectures, think about what the author or lecturer is saying. Think **ideas** not just words! Ask yourself, What point am I supposed to glean from what I am reading or listening to? Why is this important? Students who can think critically during the reading or listening process are already well on their way to learning new information and integrating it with what they already know.

- **Make decisions** continuously while you study. Ask yourself, What should I pay attention to? What information, out of hundreds of pages of information, is most important to understand and remember? What can I do to improve my understanding and to ensure that I will remember? The questions you ask before you study will help you make these decisions.

- **Use cues.** In textbooks and other printed material that you may study, headings and subheadings, pictures, graphs, and questions are included, not just as “extras” but as cues to what the author thinks is important. In lectures, observe when the instructor raises his or her voice, writes something on the board, or uses nonverbal cues to indicate that something is important. Pay attention to what is repeated in the lecture or text; good speakers or writers repeat those things they believe to be most important.

- **Monitor yourself.** If you start to lose your concentration or if you cannot understand the material, you cannot connect with your textbook. Become aware of these problems as soon as they start, and take action to reengage. If you need to take a break from reading in order to refocus, then take a short break. If you don’t understand a key idea, find someone to ask, or reread the text.

**After You Read, Listen, Take Notes, and Study**

No matter how well you read or take notes, if you do not do something with the information later, you will forget over two-thirds of the material within a week. In this book the study techniques for you to do after your actual reading or listening are critical to learning and success in college. These techniques are based on two principles of learning (discussed in more detail in Chapters 10 and 11):

- **Principle 7:** Put the ideas into your own words.
- **Principle 8:** Organize and reduce the information each time you review.

Later in this textbook, you will learn strategies that will help you to remember and retrieve information during study and review. To get you started, here are some tips:
• Use the PORPE (Predict, Organize, Rehearse, Practice, Evaluate) technique, described in Chapter 12, as a way of efficiently preparing your review for essay tests.

The Basic Strategies

You will learn a variety of strategies from this textbook. This chapter presents just the basics for the two major ways college students learn—from textbooks and from lectures. As you will see, these basic strategies are built on the BCA principles.

The BCA’s for Textbook Reading

The basic strategy for learning from textbooks involves engaging in activities before you read, while you read (so that you can stay connected), and after you read (so that you can study and review). Underlying these three phases of learning is the ability to think critically. The BCA’s of text reading are described in detail in the second section of this book. To get you started, though, here is an outline of the basic parts:

Before You Read

Activate prior knowledge as you get an idea of the chapter’s focus.

• Read the title of the chapter and reflect on what you already know about the topic.
• Read the headings and subheadings and the chapter outline or chapter summary if they are included. Develop an organizational scheme for the entire chapter. Reflect on your background knowledge as you do this.
• Set learning and studying goals for yourself.
• Formulate questions about key concepts that you think you will need to learn.
• Reflect on your survey. Before you read, monitor by asking yourself, Do I have a clear idea of what this chapter is about?

Connect While You Read

Read and annotate the chapter, one section at a time.

• Set a goal for yourself in terms of how much you will complete.
• Read and annotate the text one section at a time. Write in the text margins or use outlines, word maps, or any other technique to isolate key concepts and supporting ideas.
Before the Lecture

- Read the textbook material that goes with the lecture.
- Review your notes from previous lectures.
- If there is a course Web site, check it to see if any material about the lecture is posted.
- From the text material and previous notes, think of questions that might be answered in the lecture.
- Arrive before the lecture starts and sit where you will be able to stay connected to the lecture.
- Take your notes in a loose-leaf notebook (so you have more flexibility when studying). Date and number your notes.
- Divide your paper so you have a two-inch margin on the left (you will use this after the lecture).

Staying Connected During the Lecture

- Listen for key points. Pay attention to cues (such as when the instructor repeats something or writes something on the board) that flag what the instructor thinks are key points.
- As you listen, first think about what is being said and then take notes. Try to stress general ideas and put things in your own words (unless the instructor is giving a specific definition or tells you to write something down word for word). Thinking critically during the lecture helps you later on.
- Ask yourself questions to guide your listening and note taking. If something is not clear, ask the instructor.

After the Lecture

- As soon after the lecture as possible, review your notes. Fill in any blanks in your notes while the lecture is still fresh in your mind.
- In the left-hand margin of your paper, annotate or write questions. These might be summary statements about the lecture or information that you know you will need to remember or questions to ask yourself later as you study.
- Review these notes before the next lecture, again in a few days, and again before a test. When you review, use the reduced information (in the left margin) to self-test; refer to the rest of the notes only when you don't remember. As you review, say the material out loud.