

Second Edition

JOE CORTINA JANET ELDER KATHERINE GONNET

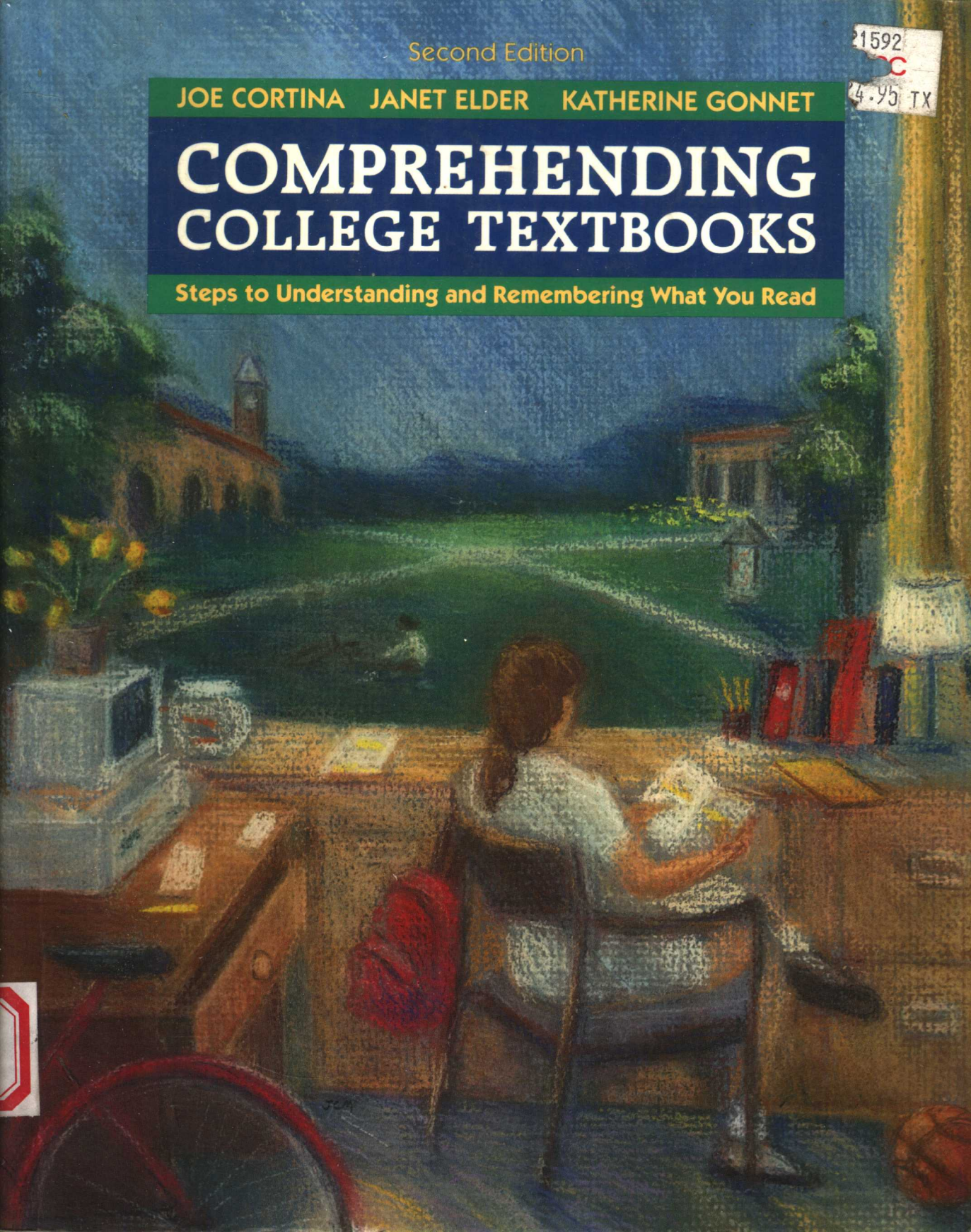
COMPREHENDING COLLEGE TEXTBOOKS

Steps to Understanding and Remembering What You Read

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SECOND EDITION

Comprehending College Textbooks

Steps to Understanding and
Remembering What You Read

Joe Cortina

Janet Elder

Katherine Gonnet

*Richland College
Dallas County Community College District*

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Comprehending College Textbooks

*Steps to Understanding and
Remembering What You Read*

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About the Authors

All three authors teach basic and advanced reading improvement and study skills courses at Richland College, a member of the Dallas County Community College District. Their combined teaching experience of more than fifty years spans elementary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as clinical remediation. Each is trained as a reading specialist.

DR. JOE CORTINA earned his undergraduate degree in English from San Diego State University, and a master's and doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction in reading from the University of North Texas. He has taught graduate courses in reading in the content areas. He was selected to represent the Dallas County Community College District as a nominee for the Piper Award for Teaching Excellence. In addition to teaching reading courses, he has served on interdisciplinary teaching teams for honors English courses and has served as a faculty leader of Richland's Writing Across the Curriculum Program. Dr. Cortina has served as a member of the editorial advisory board of the *Journal of Reading*. He is a frequent speaker at professional meetings.

DR. JANET ELDER was graduated summa cum laude from the University of Texas with a B.A. in English and Latin. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa. She was the recipient of a government fellowship for Southern Methodist University's Reading Research Specialist Program, which resulted in a master's degree. Her Ph.D. in curriculum and

instruction in reading is from Texas Woman's University where the College of Education presented her the Outstanding Dissertation Award. She established the first comprehensive secondary reading program in the Dallas Independent School District and has conducted extensive staff development training for Dallas area teachers. After teaching reading and study skills courses at Richland for several years, she was asked to develop and implement an honors program for the college. After coordinating the honors program during its first six years, she resumed teaching full time. She was selected as a member of a task force that recently reevaluated Richland's college-wide writing program. The task force is now coordinating an intensive, year-long restructuring of the writing program. She recently received an Extra-Mile Award from special services students. Dr. Elder writes instructional materials in reading, and serves as a presenter at many professional conferences.

DR. KATHERINE GONNET's educational background includes a B.S. from Texas Woman's University and a master's degree from Southern Methodist University where she was awarded a government fellowship in the Reading Research Specialist Program. Her doctorate, from the University of North Texas, is in Higher Education Administration. She served as the chairperson of Richland's Development Studies Division for six years before resuming full-time teaching. In recent years, she represented Richland in a district project to revise reading course curricula. She was selected by Richland to attend an international education program in Heidelberg, Germany. In addition to teaching reading and serving on interdisciplinary teaching teams in honors humanities and English courses, she has been a "technology scout" for the college district's Educational Computing Center, investigating the use of computers in reading instruction. She was recently selected as her division's nominee for the Piper Award for Teaching Excellence. Dr. Gonnet has also made numerous presentations at professional meetings, and is currently writing other instructional materials.

To the Instructor

This book is aimed at the entering college student whose skills are at a precollege level. The *focus* of the book is comprehension, the heart of the reading process. The *theme* of the book is that reading is a form of the thinking process. Consequently, reading makes no unique demands upon the reader. One's reading ability is related to the quality of one's thinking, the ability to make connections between elements of text and the ability to see the relationship between one's prior knowledge and the content of the text. This book attempts to provide under-prepared readers with a systematic way of thinking about and approaching college textbook material.

Unlike most books at this level, this text utilizes a theoretical framework: Reading is viewed as a psycholinguistic, interactive process. The readers bring their knowledge and experience to bear upon the text; their knowledge and experience are modified and enhanced by the content of the text. The readers are as important as the text.

Passages of varying lengths from actual college textbooks have been used in this text. *College text material is used throughout because it is what students will encounter in subsequent college course work.* With appropriate coaching and guidance from the instructor, developmental students should be able to "reach" for these passages so that they have realistic expectations about and experiences with college-level material, the ultimate goal of most developmental reading courses.

Moreover, they will not have the disappointing and disheartening experience of completing a “reading” course only to discover that it truly did not prepare them for “real” college course work.

Exercises in this text generally call for subjective responses formulated as complete sentences. Again, this mirrors reality (and serves as a foundation for summarizing and performing well on essay tests). The student’s task is always to identify the subject matter and main idea since this is what active, efficient readers must do to comprehend well. The emphasis is on direct instruction and time on task, that is, the amount of time students actually spend dealing with passages from college textbooks. Therefore, this book deliberately provides abundant practice and reinforcement.

Often, texts used in developmental reading courses cover a barrage of skills in a superficial manner. In a deliberate effort to avoid this shortcoming, we have chosen to treat vocabulary in a restricted way and to focus only on certain essential study skills. The goal is to present the critical skills that provide the framework for comprehension and to ground the student thoroughly in them. There is abundant repetition and reinforcement.

The primary focus of this book is helping students grasp the main ideas and supporting details of material they are assigned to read in their college textbooks. In working with college textbook material, however, students will encounter a great deal of new vocabulary, including many specialized terms in each subject. It is important for students to acquire this vocabulary, but it is equally important for students not to let the vocabulary cause them to “miss the forest for the trees.” Many underprepared readers tend to focus almost exclusively on words rather than ideas. They focus on words in and of themselves rather than giving attention to the words as a means of helping them unlock the content of the ideas being presented.

To minimize this problem, in this book we have simply listed beneath each passage the words that are likely to be new to students or to cause them difficulty and *have defined them according to the way they are used in the passage*. Moreover, the part of speech and pronunciation are given. You may ask students to refer to the lists of words as needed, or you may prefer to direct their attention to them in a more systematic manner. It is impossible to anticipate every word that will be new to students. Consequently, you may find it necessary to add vocabulary beyond what is listed beneath a passage or to have individual students add words as needed.

Since part of the students' task in underlining and annotating college textbook passages is to identify, mark, and define new terms, no vocabulary words are listed or defined in the Supplementary Exercises and the culminating Chapter 8, "Remembering College Textbook Material through Organizing." Students should be made to understand that they are responsible for identifying and defining *any* word that blocks their complete comprehension of a passage.

The emphasis in this book is also upon the theoretical construct of *metacomprehension*: creating in the reader an awareness of the function that the sentences and paragraphs fulfill, as well as an awareness of a paragraph's organization (e.g., definition, simple listing, sequence, comparison-contrast and cause-effect). The ability to perceive function and organization results not only in increased comprehension but also in enhanced retention.

Chapter 6 deals with critical thinking. Again, we have tried to target essential skills rather than barrage students with a multitude of them. For this reason, we concentrate on distinguishing opinion from fact, making inferences, and recognizing an author's point of view.

Comprehension monitoring is demonstrated and emphasized throughout this book. It is important for students (1) to realize when they are comprehending and when they are not, and (2) to have a repertoire of strategies available to them when they fail to grasp meaning. It is also important for students to learn to isolate the source of their confusion or misunderstanding (such as an unknown term or lack of background information). Research clearly indicates that many less able readers do not see comprehension as part of the reading process; others are unable to judge whether or not they have understood material they are reading. It is essential that whenever a student fails to produce an acceptable response, he or she determines (or is helped to determine) *why*. Most materials provide no feedback other than whether an answer is right or wrong. In particular, the initial chapters present several formulations of "acceptable" answers since many unsuccessful readers labor under the impression that there is one right answer and only one correct way to state it. This text provides examples of answers of varying degrees of acceptability so that students can learn to evaluate the quality of their responses.

Materials don't teach, but a good teacher can use this book to help students learn to comprehend college textbook material. Your willingness to become involved with the material, your enthusiasm for acquiring new information (since none of us has had a course in every subject,

you may also learn some new things from the college textbook excerpts used in this book!), and your pleasure in learning can be a model for your students. We wish you great success as you help prepare your students to read college textbooks effectively. Toward that end, we have incorporated in the *Instructor's Manual* many of the strategies and approaches for using this book that have proved especially successful in our own classrooms.

Comprehending College Textbooks is characterized by the following:

- Excerpts from college content area textbooks (which typically do not appear extensively in reading instruction textbooks at this level)
- A no-nonsense, no-frills, direct instruction approach that focuses entirely upon comprehension and retention (rather than a smattering of a multitude of "skills")
- Extensive, purposeful practice and reinforcement of basic comprehension techniques
- Metacomprehension (the function of a sentence or paragraph in relation to the entire passage)
- Comprehension monitoring ("What have I understood and how well have I understood? How can I deal with material I don't understand adequately?")
- Longer textbook passages and excerpts

Moreover, this book fulfills these goals:

- Anticipates faulty strategies that inefficient readers often use
- Stresses and explains "obvious" skills because these are not always obvious to the underprepared reader
- Describes what good readers do in order to read well, because these steps are not clear to underprepared readers
- Explains *why* readers need to know certain techniques; why a strategy works; and why it is important
- Concentrates on *the teaching of comprehension*, because it is the most difficult component of reading instruction to teach
- Addresses the frustration and discouragement college readers may experience and explains how to cope with such feelings

The concepts presented in this text (an organized, thorough approach to investigating a passage's meaning) are hardly new. Nearly every text in this field presents the notion of subject matter, main ideas, details, and organization or structure. What is different is that the approach is systematic and incorporates comprehension monitoring and support strategies. Most books do not address the problem of what students are to do when they *don't* comprehend. The instructional methodology also differs in that students are not simply confronted with a set of exercises and written directions. Rather, the teacher, with the help of the text, actively guides the students deductively through the techniques being introduced. Students move toward autonomy and maturity in their reading in a way that promotes mastery.

The introduction of this book is designed to orient students to the book's content and to give a rationale for the methodology used. To gain full advantage from this book, it is *essential* for the instructor and the students to go over this section together. The introduction is an integral part of this textbook.

In this textbook, we have chosen to use the terms *subject matter* and *topic* interchangeably. Although some instructors prefer to treat the topic as a single *aspect* of a more general subject matter, we believe that making this distinction may unnecessarily confuse students who are using this book. Therefore, we have used the term *subject matter* throughout this book when referring to what the author is writing about.

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Our students offered wonderful suggestions and encouraging comments during the revision of this book. They have been among our best and most helpful critics.

Our thanks would not be complete without recognizing the continuing contributions of our families. This book has also been part of their lives for several years. We offer our heartfelt thanks to them for their constant interest, patience, and support.

Joe Cortina

Janet Elder

Katherine Gonnet

To the Student

Dear Student,

Welcome to the second edition of *Comprehending College Textbooks: Steps to Understanding and Remembering What You Read*.

This is a very special book. Every reading selection in this book was carefully chosen from popular textbooks now in wide use in colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Many students feel unprepared to deal with college textbooks. They know that they have not yet had the opportunity to gain the practice, skill, and confidence to handle college textbooks effectively. Because we want you to have many chances to work with material from actual college textbooks, we have included *only* selections from college textbooks.

This book focuses on what we believe is the single most important ability you can have as a reader: the ability to comprehend (*understand*) your college textbooks. This book presents specific strategies to help you identify and recall the important information and concepts in your textbooks.

We have deliberately selected textbook passages from a variety of subjects: history, biology, computer science, business, government, economics, psychology, humanities, sociology, geology, and philosophy. When you first meet a passage from each of these subjects, you will

be given a brief description of what each subject deals with. If you are like most students, you will encounter many subjects in college that are new to you.

Perhaps you will never take an economics course or a computer science course or a biology course, but you *will* have *some* idea about the subject matter of these courses from the textbook selections you will read in this book. Perhaps *because* you are introduced to a subject in this book and find it interesting, you may even decide to take a course in a subject that you might otherwise not have taken. College is the ideal time to explore *any* area in which you think you may have an interest. You will never know if you are interested in a subject, however, if you don't learn enough about it to make an informed decision.

For the sake of convenience, colleges often divide academic subjects into several broad areas, or "disciplines," as they are called. The *natural sciences* consist of subjects such as astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, physical science, and physics. Another broad area is referred to as the *social sciences*. These include history, political science (government), sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics. The *humanities* consist of literature, the fine arts (drama, dance, music, art), and philosophy. Examples of *communications* courses could include composition, foreign languages, and speech. *Business, engineering, and technical programs* are other areas in which many colleges offer course work.

The college textbook passages used in this book for illustrations and practice exercises contain a great deal of useful and fascinating information. Please don't view the passages merely as "exercises" to be completed. They are more than that. They are opportunities to acquire valuable background information and introductions to subjects that may be new to you. You may find, in fact, that the information you learn from the passages in this book provides helpful information in other courses you are taking or will be taking.

A word of warning: In this text, there are no shortcuts. You will have to *think* about what you are doing because sometimes the passages will seem difficult. Remember, these are from actual college textbooks. As you increase your skill and confidence, you will become more and more adept at comprehending college-level texts. You may need to "stretch" a little to understand some of the passages presented in this book, but soon you may be saying, "Hey, I *can* do this. College-level material is manageable after all." We hope you will feel this way as

you complete the exercises in this book. "Time on task" (in other words, *practice*) is closely related to how much progress you attain. No one else can do the exercises in this textbook for you. There is nothing any teacher can "do" to you to make you learn. This book is for students who *want* to learn and who are willing to work at improving their comprehension in order to learn in college.

Remember that no book can "teach," but that you can learn from books. *It is what you do with the book* that determines whether learning occurs.

Joe Cortina
Janet Elder
Katherine Gonnet

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