

COMPREHENDING COLLEGE TEXTBOOKS

Third Edition

STEPS TO

UNDERSTANDING

AND REMEMBERING

WHAT YOU READ



Joe Cortina • Janet Elder • Katherine Gonnet



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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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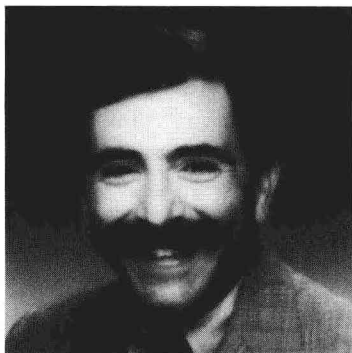
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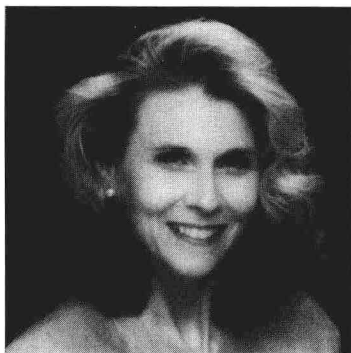
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The authors have worked together as a writing team for more than a decade. *Comprehending College Textbooks*, their first book, was first published in 1989. Their second textbook, *Opening Doors: Understanding College Reading*, was published in 1995. In addition, Dr. Elder and Dr. Gonnet co-authored the reading section of *How to Prepare for the TASP*, a study guide for entering college students who take the Texas Academic Skills Program Test.

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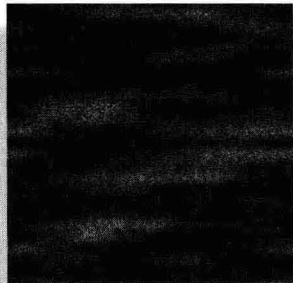
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OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

Chapter 1: Determining Subject Matter

Determining the subject matter is a skill that focuses your attention on *what a passage is basically about*. Many times in a college textbook passage, determining or deciding upon the subject matter is easy because there may be a boldfaced heading at the beginning of the passage that clearly indicates the subject matter. You will also learn to use other techniques to help you determine the subject matter of the passage when there is no heading.

Chapter 2: Locating Directly Stated Main Ideas

Finding the main idea of a passage focuses your attention on *the most important idea in the passage*. Many times in a college textbook passage, locating the directly stated main idea is easy because the main idea is presented in the first sentence of the paragraph. (What could be easier than that?) However, the main idea sentence may also be found at the end of the paragraph or even in the middle of the paragraph. With practice, you will be able to locate this important idea sentence. The main ideas of textbook paragraphs are often used as the basis for test questions on college exams.

Chapter 3: Formulating Implied Main Ideas

Sometimes a college textbook passage does not have a directly stated main idea sentence. Instead, the author gives you many ideas, facts, or examples, and you must formulate (or infer) a version of the main idea of the passage using your own words. With practice, you will be able to determine *when* there is no directly stated main idea in a passage, and you will be able to formulate a main idea sentence using your own words.

Chapter 4: Identifying Supporting Details

You will find a number of supporting details in textbook passages. These details *support* the main idea. Of course, some of the details are more important than others. In college courses, teachers often base exam questions on these details. Thus it is important to be able to select the

significant supporting details. Ultimately, you will be able to determine the relationship between the main idea and its supporting details.

Chapter 5: Recognizing Authors' Writing Patterns

Authors organize their material by using several common writing patterns: listing, sequence, definition, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect. As you learn to recognize these patterns, you will be able to predict what is likely to come next in textbook passages and to recall more easily what you have read.

Chapter 6: Applying Comprehension Skills to Longer Passages

One of the hallmarks of a maturing reader is the ability to deal with increasingly longer textbook passages. You will learn how to apply the skills learned in earlier chapters to determine the overall subject matter and main ideas of longer textbook passages. You will also have practice summarizing these longer passages.

Chapter 7: Remembering College Textbook Material through Organizing

After reading a college textbook passage or series of passages, you will want to remember what you have read well enough to pass a test on it. You will practice using several organizing techniques that enable you to prepare to recite and remember what you have read. These include:

- Memory techniques
- Underlining and annotating textbook passages
- Outlining and mapping
- Making study and vocabulary cards

Chapter 8: Thinking Critically as You Read

Even though you already think critically every day of your life, you may not be accustomed to thinking critically as you read your textbooks. Thinking critically as you read involves going beyond determining the subject matter, main idea, and supporting details. You will learn to

distinguish opinions from facts, make inferences based on information in passages, and recognize an author's point of view.

As you gain proficiency in your reading, you will find that you do not need to apply *every* technique presented in this book every time you read your college textbooks. But when you *do* need them, you will know how to use them. Learning and practicing the strategies in this book will prepare you for reading college textbooks.

THE READING PROCESS

Students frequently have misconceptions about the reading process. Since your beliefs can influence your performance, it is important that you understand the following points about the reading process:

1. *Reading makes no unusual or unique demands on a reader.* You often “read” people’s faces, get the main idea of what is going on when you observe a situation, draw conclusions about what you’ve seen, and so forth. The same mental processes are used when you read.
2. *Reading is a form of the thinking process. You read with your brain, not your eyes.* (Blind people read through braille.) Your eyes simply transmit images to the brain. Improving your reading means improving your thinking—not practicing moving your eyes faster or in a different way.
3. *Reading includes three steps: preparing yourself to read* (thinking about what you already know about a subject and setting purposes for reading); *comprehending*; and *reacting* to what you read.
4. *Effective readers are highly interactive readers.* They constantly seek to bring meaning to the text; they take steps to correct the situation when they are not comprehending.
5. *Many comprehension problems are not just reading problems.* If you fail to understand something you are reading, it could be because it is poorly written. More likely, however, you lack the background information needed to comprehend. (That is, you still wouldn’t understand if someone read it *aloud* to you.) Try reading another textbook or an easier book on the same subject, and then return to the text that is causing you difficulty. You might also consult your instructor, a classmate, or another knowledgeable person. Sometimes, you may want to prepare questions about the things you don’t understand in order to ask about them in class. Often, simply looking up items that you don’t understand in an encyclopedia will help you begin to make up for any de-

iciencies in your background knowledge and help you understand what is being presented.

6. *Good readers are sensitive to the structure of the material they are reading.* By seeing how it is structured (or organized), they improve their comprehension and recall. They not only know the subject matter and main idea of each paragraph, they understand how each paragraph is organized (e.g., sequence, listing, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and definition).
7. *Speed is a by-product of comprehension.* The more quickly you understand something, the faster you can read it. "Speed" without comprehension is meaningless. Reading is more than just allowing your eyes to pass over lines of print.

Characteristics of College-Level Reading

As you work your way through the exercises in this book, you will begin to notice that there are several characteristics of college-level textbook reading:

1. In college-level reading, there may be *many* ideas or facts packed into a single paragraph. We call this ***idea density***. Nearly every sentence seems to contain new or important information. Everything seems important in this type of paragraph!
2. In college-level reading, many new terms will be introduced because each college subject has its own special vocabulary. This is called the ***technical vocabulary*** for a subject. Remember, though, that textbook authors define and explain many of these new terms. It may take one sentence or several pages to give you the information you need about these new terms. Pay special attention to these terms. You will certainly be asked about these words on tests in your college courses.
3. In college-level reading, there will be ***patterns of organization*** which you will learn to recognize. For example, in the social sciences, the cause-effect pattern is widely used. This pattern often is found in the natural sciences also. Other patterns you will learn to recognize are the definition pattern, the comparison-contrast pattern, the sequence pattern, and the simple listing pattern.
4. In college-level reading, you will frequently need to stop and ask yourself, "Did I understand what I just read?" Asking yourself this question is the first step in ***comprehension monitoring***, a process you will learn in this book.

5. In college-level reading, you may not have adequate background knowledge to understand a subject. It may seem as if you are trying to read another language! Sometimes an author or your instructor may assume that you know more than you actually do. If this is the case, it is still your responsibility to fill in the gaps in your knowledge. You can do this by talking with the instructor, a tutor, or a knowledgeable classmate or friend. You can also do this by reading simpler explanations. You can find simpler explanations in other textbooks or books from the library or bookstore. *Then* return to your more difficult textbook. Although this may seem like more work, it can actually save you time and frustration.
6. In college-level reading you will find that not all textbooks are equally well written. Unfortunately, some are less well organized and less clearly written. Should you encounter a text of this sort, it will still be your responsibility to deal with that textbook by using the skills presented in this book, by obtaining more background knowledge, by getting a simpler book on the same subject, or by talking about the subject with someone who is knowledgeable.
7. In college-level reading, there will be times when you feel very discouraged. This feeling is common to every student at one time or another. We refer to this feeling as *intellectual despair*. Fortunately, you can learn to overcome this discouragement by using the skills presented in this book. These strategies will help you learn how to understand difficult material.

The Importance of Background Knowledge to Reading Comprehension

In well-written paragraphs, the sentences of the paragraph fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You may also have begun to realize that understanding how the “pieces” fit together depends upon how close the match is between your background knowledge and the subject matter. If you do not know enough about the subject matter to make sense of what the author is saying, then you, the reader, must fill the gaps in your background knowledge.

When you lack background knowledge in a subject you are reading—and this happens frequently when students are new to college subjects and college textbooks—you have a comprehension problem. However, this is not simply a *reading* comprehension problem. It is a more *general* comprehension problem; that is, you probably would not understand the material even if someone read it *to* you. This means that you

will have to take whatever steps are necessary to obtain the background information you lack. This will enable you to return to the textbook and comprehend it.

Only you can take the necessary steps to correct the problem of inadequate background knowledge. These steps might include reading parts of another textbook or other books (perhaps easier ones) on the same subject, consulting an encyclopedia, or talking with someone knowledgeable about the subject. These steps require effort, and, obviously, there are no shortcuts.

Going the “extra mile” to get more background knowledge is just part of being a responsible and mature learner. You may discover how exciting and how satisfying it is to gain an understanding of new or difficult material through your own efforts. You will find that you feel better about yourself as a student (a “student” is one who *studies*) when you take the initiative for your own learning. In short, you may discover how much joy there can be in learning.

The very fact that you are taking this course indicates that you intend to improve your reading skills and background knowledge. You may be surprised at how much new knowledge you gain from the textbook excerpts in this book since all of them are taken from widely used college textbooks.

MAINTAINING A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

The keys to maintaining a positive attitude are to realize that everyone occasionally feels discouraged, to know that you do not have to give in to these feelings, and to acquire the reading skills needed to handle college textbooks.

What can you do? First, be patient with yourself. Some subjects *will* be harder for you. Plan to spend more time on them; this alone can work wonders. Seek extra help if you need it—from the instructor, from a tutor, from a classmate, or from other, simpler books on the same subject.

Break a big assignment into smaller parts. Decide that you are not going to quit until you read and understand at least *one* section or small part of the assigned chapter. Once you have mastered one small section, your self-esteem will be higher and you will have the confidence and motivation to tackle the next section.

If a particular assignment becomes *too* frustrating, put it down for a

while and come back to it later. Study another subject, take a walk, or exercise to clear your mind.

If you don't understand an idea or a concept, try to pinpoint exactly what it is that you don't understand. This sometimes clears it up. At the very least, you will have your questions ready to ask the instructor or someone else who can help.

It might be useful to you to ask successful classmates or the instructor for their suggestions for doing well in the class and for handling the textbook effectively. Sometimes a "study buddy" or a study group can make a dramatic improvement in your grade (and provide a welcome support group). Be sure to choose your study partners carefully—and be sure to uphold your responsibility by coming to the study sessions as prepared as possible and with your questions clearly in mind.

Finally, remember that you don't have to love a subject in order to do well in it (although it makes it more enjoyable). Try to replace your negative self-talk ("I can't do this." "I'm going to fail." "I've never been any good at this stuff.") with positive self-talk ("Even if I can't understand *all* of this assignment, I'll stay with it until I've learned at least one new thing." "Other people have learned this; I can too." "I'm not going to let this defeat me."). A positive attitude, determination, and a willingness to work hard separate successful students from unsuccessful ones. Successful students don't believe that their success comes from luck. Geniuses are rare. If you succeed, it will be because *you* made the effort to succeed. And you can feel very good about that accomplishment.

"BUT I'M NOT INTERESTED IN HISTORY"

(Or Science or English or Math or Government or . . .)

No matter what your major is, you will still be required to take a variety of courses—and some of them may not appeal to you or interest you. Students often say, "If I like a subject, I can concentrate when I read it; but if I *don't* like it, I can't concentrate on it or understand it." They assume they have no control over whether or not they are interested in a subject.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Part of your responsibility as a student is to develop an interest in your courses. As a bonus, you'll find that you will enjoy your courses more.

The more you know about a course, the more you will want to know. This is especially important to remember at the beginning of the semes-