Learning Module: Survey Reading

Suppose you just purchased your course textbooks for the semester and your teachers have assigned your first readings. What do you do? Many students crack open the cover, begin reading at word one on page one, plow straight ahead until the last word of the last page of the assignment, along the way transforming most of the pages into bright yellow with a highlighter, close the cover, and without giving much thought to what they read, move on to other activities. Often these students can’t recall much of what they have read. There are several problems with this approach, which this and other reading modules will address. Mastery of this module will increase your reading comprehension and increase your reading efficiency.

Would you embark on a time-limited journey with only a vague idea of where you were going and no knowledge of the route? Probably not: who wants to waste hard-earned money and time taking wrong turns? You would probably consult a map or try to get a basic overview of where you were going and some of the landmarks along the way. Think of reading as a time-limited journey. If you take the time to "get the big picture" before setting out, then your reading efficiency will improve because you will know how to get to your destination. This module contains two forms to help you do this.

**TASK 1 (surveying a book)**

Your first task is to look over the Surveying Textbooks form included with this module. Its purpose is to provide a structure for you to become acquainted with a textbook before reading it. Complete this form for one or more of your course textbooks. Work as quickly as possible, and remember that your goal is to get a good overview of the text and not to learn the details. Feel free to modify the method to suit each text.

**TASK 2 (surveying a chapter)**

Following your textbook survey, select an assigned chapter in the same text. Your second task is to survey that chapter before reading it by completing the Surveying Chapters procedure included with this module.

Surveying a chapter as we suggest could take between 5 and 20 minutes. Extra work? Not really! A thorough survey actually decreases total reading time—much like reading a map before a trip can save time. In addition, your survey could result in exposure to as much as 70% of the important information contained within the chapter—before you even read it!

We cannot stress enough the importance of surveying. An "eye opener" for many students in this regard is the following exercise (Bransford & Johnson, 1972). Read the following passage without pausing, cover the page, and then write down everything that you can remember. **Try it!**

The procedure is actually quite simple. First, you arrange things into different groups, although one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities, then that is the next step; otherwise, you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important, but complications can easily arise and mistakes can be expensive. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but one can never tell. After the procedure is completed, one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then, they can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually, they will be used once more, and the whole cycle will have to be repeated. However, this is part of life.


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How much did you recall? If you are like most of us, you had difficulty remembering the described procedure. The first time I read that paragraph some of the sentences made no sense at all! Why couldn’t we remember more? Was the vocabulary difficult? No. Were the sentences...
overly complex? No. What was it that made it tough?

One possible reason is that the passage didn’t carry much meaning for you. The first time I read this, the sentences didn’t seem to be connected. Something seemed missing—something fundamental. That which is missing is a title or heading that provides a topic or focus that allows you to activate prior knowledge about the subject matter. A title or heading can give the reader an “advanced organizer” that enables the information to make sense and be memorable. When you read something without any notion as to what it is about, the reading is slow and cumbersome and comprehension and memory are poor.

What if we tell you that this paragraph is called “Washing Clothes?” Does it make more sense? Reread the paragraph and now see how much you can remember. Notice how each sentence now has greater meaning. Hopefully, this will convince you that there is much to be gained by simply giving more thought to the titles and headings of your reading assignments.

**TASK SUMMARY**

To master this module:

1. Complete the *Surveying Textbooks* form for one or more of your course textbooks.

2. Complete the *Surveying Chapters* procedure for one or more chapters from your course textbooks.

Be ready to discuss your surveying experience when you bring in your module for discussion. Bring the forms and any notes you made while doing the tasks. Don't be surprised if the Learning Counsellor or Learning Counselling Assistant asks you about the contents of the chapter.

**REFERENCE**


**This Module Includes:**

1) Module: Survey Reading (Survey Reading Module.doc)
   a) Surveying Textbooks
   b) Surveying Chapters
1. What is the title of the book? __________________________________________
   Before reading, take at least one minute and think about what the title means to you and what you already know about the topic. Note your ideas in the space below.
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

2. What information is on the inside front and back covers? __________________

3. Does the book have a Glossary? _____ Or perhaps there are Glossaries as part of each chapter? ______

4. Look over the Table of Contents. Why do you suppose the book has been organised in this way? Does it build upon itself? Does it go from simple to complex? Note your thoughts on the organisation below.
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

5. Does the book have Appendices? _____ If yes, then list them below. Why are they separate from the text?
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

6. Does the book have an Author Index? _____ Is there a Subject Index? _____ Are they combined into one? ______
   Search through these and find terms and authors who are “important.” If there are many entries for terms or authors, then you can bet that they are important! List a few of these core terms and people below.
   Terms: ______________________________________________________
   Authors: ______________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

7. Where are the references located within the book? __________________

8. Who is the author and what are his/her credentials? __________________

9. What is the date and location of publication? __________________

10. What chapter learning aids does the author provide (e.g., Objectives, Study Questions)? __________________

11. Does the book have a preface? _____ A special introductory chapter? _____ A special summary chapter? _____
   If yes, then use them to answer the remaining questions.
   • What is the author’s purpose in writing this book? __________________
   • What is the focus and perspective of the entire book? __________________
Surveying Chapters

The purpose of this process is **not** to learn everything in the chapter. Rather, it is to get an overview of what is in the chapter, and to prepare for effective reading, learning and remembering. When you first use this method it may take you as long as 20 minutes. With a bit of practice, however, you will be able to survey a fairly large chapter in 10 minutes with good results. Research indicates that the time it takes to survey and then read a chapter is **less** than the time it takes to just read the chapter! So this method will improve your learning and save you time. As a bonus, when you do fully read the chapter, it will seem like you are reading it a second time. You can modify this procedure to fit your material.

1) Use a separate piece of paper. Head the sheet with the title of the chapter and the date.

2) Now, think about the title of the chapter. Imagine that every word in the title is important. Think about each word and what it means. Why did the author select these words to represent the chapter? What do you already know about this topic? Before looking or doing any reading, make your best guess as to what will be in the chapter. Working quickly, note your ideas on the paper in point form. Don’t be overly concerned about getting it right.

3) Read fully the first paragraph (or the section headed "Introduction"), and then turn to the back of the chapter and read the final paragraph (or the section headed "Summary" or "Conclusion"). Was the title helpful in predicting what was going to be in the chapter? Based on your reading of the beginning and end of the chapter, briefly describe on paper the chapter contents. Do this from memory and without looking at the chapter. This might be a good place to use a Concept Map instead of prose. If you are not familiar with Concept Maps, ask for the handout or consult the Learning Module: Reading and Concept Mapping.

4) Do a quick pass through the chapter and focus on each heading. After you have done this, take a minute or two to add to your written ideas from Step #3. (If your book has no headings to speak of, an alternative is to read the first or last sentence in each paragraph. After a few paragraphs, you will probably be able to tell if the first or last sentence is most helpful. Obviously, this method takes more time than using headings, but it will still save you time in the long run.)

5) Do another quick pass through the chapter, looking at the pictures, charts, graphs, formulas, diagrams, maps, etc. Skim read the captions for these illustrations. Notice the headings and labels on graphs, tables, and diagrams. Don’t try to learn the details at this point – just focus on the concepts and variables. What issues are addressed by each figure? What themes are central to the chapter? Add to your written description or Concept Map.

6) Consider what questions you hope will be answered by this chapter. Jot them down. You can try changing each heading into a question or questions.

7) Some students find it very helpful to do another concept map, from memory, on the back of the paper. Experiment with this and see if it helps.

8) Take a break before reading the chapter. See the **Learning Module: The 3-R System of Reading** for an effective strategy to follow up on your Survey.