S = SURVEY

Before you crack open your book to page one and dive in, take a few minutes to read the preface and introduction to the text, and browse through the table of contents and the index. This will tell you the main topics that the book will cover, the author’s particular approach to the subject (i.e., why he/she wrote another text on the subject when there are probably twenty on the market), and what the basic organizational structure will be.

A similar process is repeated before each chapter. Read all the titles and subtitles, study any pictures, charts or graphs, and, if there are any, read the summary at the beginning or end of the chapter and study any questions. Surveying a chapter in this way gives you the “big picture”, a frame work of the main ideas which will help to hold the details together later.

Q = QUESTION

Before beginning to read, take the subtitle of the section (or the first sentence of a paragraph) and turn it into a question. For example, if you’re reading part of a chapter called “Functions of the Spinal Cord”, ask yourself, “What are the functions of the spinal cord?”

R #1 = READ

You then read, not passively sliding your eyes over the words, but actively engaging in the text, trying to find the answer to your question. Be cautious, however, that you don’t end up skimming for the answer to your question and missing other important information.

* Courtesy of the University of Guelph Learning Commons
R #2 = RESPOND

Once you’ve read the section, close the textbook and answer your question, either orally or on paper, in your own words. If you can’t answer the question, you should reread the section until you can. If, after several tries, you still can’t answer your question, go on to the next sections and see if things become clearer. You may find that you need to change your question. For example, you may have first posed the question: “What is the Treaty of Versailles?” for the subtitle “The Treaty of Versailles”, but, after reading the section, you may find that a better question is, “Why was the Treaty of Versailles created?” If changing your question doesn’t help clarify the reading, it’s time to get some help. Your instructor or TA are good places to start, or Studying for Success Coaches can also help with effective reading strategies.

R #3 = RECORD

Once you’ve understood the material and can summarize it in your own words, the next step is to record the information in some way. Some common methods are to highlight and/or mark the text, or take notes, or some combination of both. Whichever method or combination of methods you choose, it’s critical to remember to read and understand the material first, and then go back and record.

R #4 = REVIEW

In courses where there is a lot of factual material to remember, a regular review period (usually once a week) can be a very effective strategy for retaining information. Integrating a weekly review period into your study routine will help you remember more of the information longer, thereby changing the nature of the studying done at exam time. Rather than relearning material that has been forgotten because you haven’t looked at it since reading it or writing it down, preparing for an exam can include a review of familiar material and rehearsal strategies like trying old exams.

The secret to making regular review periods effective is to start form the beginning of the course in each review session. The volume of material to review increases as the semester progresses, but the amount of time needed to review older material decreases. After you’ve reviewed the first week’s material a few times, it will take only minutes to skim over it and recall the key points.