

STUDYING AND THE SQ3R STUDY SYSTEM

"Studying" is not the same as simply "reading," even though both tasks often involve books, magazines, or other printed materials. At least three important differences between the two activities exist: (1) our motives for doing one or the other, (2) the goals we set for ourselves in each case, and (3) the techniques we use in each situation.

Differing Motives

General reading for example, is usually voluntary, something we do primarily for its own sake and of our own accord. We read to answer a question, to solve a problem, to pursue an interest, or perhaps simply to combat boredom through escape into an interesting story or article.

Study-reading, on the other hand, is often not truly voluntary. The pragmatic demands of school or work may require that we achieve intellectual mastery over a particular body of knowledge, like it or not. Instead of being pulled into the reading act by interest, we may be pushed into it by need. Because of this, our goals for study-reading are often quite different from those we have for general reading.

Differing Goals

In general reading, for example, we're often willing to settle for a relatively light, overall, quite general level of understanding. Though naturally we wouldn't want to read without comprehension, we aren't necessarily concerned here with true mastery of every single fact and detail a piece of reading material has to offer.

In study-reading, however, all this changes. Our goal now becomes learning and the ability to recall the information encountered at will. Instead of temporary understanding, we must now aim for permanent learning. This means that our reading techniques must vary, too.

Differing Techniques

In general reading, for example, we usually read a story or article once straight through. Though we may occasionally re-read a particular passage for clarification of some fine nuance of meaning or simply because we enjoyed it, the process is overall generally a start-to-finish one. When we're through, we're through; and when we close the book or magazine we've been reading, it's with a feeling of finality as we move to other activities.

In study-reading, however, this is not the case. When we finish an initial reading of a piece of material, particularly if we've done that reading in the same manner as we do in general reading, our work has just begun. In study-reading, indeed, the most important things we do often occur after and before reading, not actually during the reading act itself. Though simple understanding may occur relatively "automatically" during reading, learning does not. For effective study-reading, then, we need a completely different method of attack.

In response to this, various reading authorities have devised certain "strategies" or overall study "formulas" to help us polish our study-skills and make our study-reading more efficient. The "grandfather" of all these systems is Francis P. Robinson's SQ3R study-system outlined in his book, Effective Study (Harper and Row, Revised Edition 1961).

The SQ3R Study Plan

SQ3R stands for the five steps Professor Robinson suggests as essential for successful, efficient mastery of a specified body of instructional material. This system was invented primarily for textbook material, but its major features can usually be adapted to good advantage for any reading-learning task. The five steps involved are Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. Before proceeding into how to use the system, each term ought probably to be defined.

Survey. This first step is based upon the idea that we learn a total body of information best and most easily if we first approach it at the overall, general level. For most readers, this is about as far as one single reading of a piece of material gets them anyway, so Professor Robinson's survey step is simply a faster way of achieving approximately the same thing. In surveying, the reader skims rapidly through the entire selection, noting organizational patterns, key ideas, style, and general focus. Surveying is not reading, but it is information-gathering, and students first using the technique are often surprised to see how much they can "get" from a selection in this way. Words-per-minute rates during surveying should be from 500 to 1,000 w.p.m. and up.

Question. The second step of the system is based on the idea that we read best when we're reading to achieve a particular purpose or answer a specific question. Thus, the posing of leading or directing questions before reading should logically be good practice. The basic procedure for this step is to convert topical and subject headings into questions, though in some material this must be modified in ways to be presented in more detail later.

Read. After a question has been posed, the reader now has a specific task to be pursued: the answering of that question. Rather than aimlessly moving their eyes over the print, they can now seek out a particular set of facts or a particular generalization. A direction has been defined, and a measure of success delineated; the student's reading will now be purposeful, not casual.

Recite. To determine whether or not the answer to a particular question has been found, the test of recitation or recall must be made. Can the reader now answer the question, or can they not? If they can, they're ready to move on; if not, they should re-read and try again. In a class setting, the teacher often fulfills this testing function; in person, self-directed study, the reader must do it themselves.

Review. And finally, after the reader has moved through the entire unit, chapter, or selection in the above manner--asking themselves questions, reading to find the answers to these questions, and then checking their step-by-step progress by forcing themselves to recall and recite these answers--comes the time for putting all the pieces back together, for regaining what the initial survey first achieved; an integrated, overall understanding of the total body of information being studied. By glancing back through the selection, quickly and briefly re-answering mentally all the major questions posed, the reader now ties it all together again. As they began with an overview, so they end.

Applying the SQ3R System

So now, our key terms defined, let's look concretely at each step in the sequence. Behaviorally, just what does the reader do at each point? Since SQ3R works best with well-written, tightly organized textual material, let's imagine that we're encountering for the first time a total chapter in a Science of Social Studies textbook.

SURVEY

The first step to be taken in surveying is to carefully read the title of the chapter. How does it fit into the overall focus of this unit, and how does it fit into the total organization of the entire book? Go to the table of contents and determine what ideas precede it and what ideas follow it. Only when this is accomplished are you truly ready to begin.

Next, leaf through the entire chapter, noting carefully the author's system of major and minor headings and subheadings. These make up their overall outline of the chapter, and give you your best estimate of the total plan they had in mind as they began to write. If you're an "outliner," these headings will probably become the basis of your outline, and you may even wish to jot them down or memorize them at this point.

As you move through the chapter, also note any pictures, charts, or graphs the author has used to illustrate key points. Be sure that you can understand, at least generally, what each of these visual aids has to say.

Finally, if there's a "summary" statement or section, read this to complete your survey. Then pause a moment, mentally review what you've gotten so far, and move on to the next step.

QUESTION

Now move back to the beginning of the selection and pose a question to read during the first major section to be covered. Some books actually include a guiding question or two at this point, but in most cases you must provide your own. The easiest way to do this is by turning the first major heading into a question. If it reads "Causes of the Civil War," for example, convert this to "What were the causes of the Civil War?"

READ

Now, read that section--from the first heading to the next--in order to answer your question. This reading should be a searching, problem-solving kind of activity, probably much slower than your survey but still faster than you'd ordinarily go without a survey behind you.

RECITE

This step is probably the most important one of all. Immediately after you've finished the section, look away from the book and answer your question. Don't just tell yourself, "O.K.; I've got it." Immediate recall is one of the strongest learning and retention aids you can use, but it demands conscious paraphrase either by oral or silent verbalization. Without this activity, SQ3R loses 90% of its impact.

After you've done this and are sure you've gotten what's important so far, repeat steps 2, 3, and 4 (Question, Read, and Recite) section by section by section. If at any point in the process you can't answer your question, re-read, look away, and recite again. Keep repeating this pattern until you've come to the end of the total selection.

If you're a "note-taker," do your note-taking during the recite stages, not the reading ones. Simply copying as you read can be very mechanical, and verbatim copying is not nearly as good of a memory aid as is paraphrase recalling. Walter Pauk, an expert on studying, has put it this way: "Make notes, don't take notes!"

REVIEW

Now, with the total selection behind you, is the time to carefully review what you've learned. Generally speaking, this review step is much like a survey, though it can very profitably also include a paraphrase summary or any other reviewing technique you've found personally successful in the past. Some students save most of their outlining and/or note-taking or underlining for this point, even though it takes a little longer. They feel, with considerable logic, that only at this point can they truly decide exactly which parts of the selection should be included in an outline or committed to paper. Because of this, they usually end up with fewer notes than otherwise, but more concise ones. Either way, this final paper-and-pencil step is a good one, particularly if you must wait some time to be examined on the material studied and want something to refer back to for a later, delayed review.

Adapting the SQ3R Method to Various Materials

The system outlined above is pretty much the "pure" SQ3R designed primarily for textbook study. After you've mastered it with textbooks, however, you can adapt its overall principles to many different learning situations: an entire book can be surveyed as an introduction to a course, a short-story or novel can be "dipped into" from point to point as a way of getting the "feel" of the total work, or a play or a poem can be surveyed as an introductory overview prior to actual close reading.

A final point: the actual "formula" given here isn't really the point; but the principles of learning it is built upon are. Getting the big picture first, noting the author's overall organizational plan, setting specific purposes and then pursuing them, and the use of immediate recall and verbal paraphrase as aids to learning and retention--these are the key elements to remember. Try them on your next reading-study task, and learn better, faster, and more permanently!

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