Study Tips and Reading Strategies to Help You

There are many sources that provide information and tips on getting the most out of studying, reading your textbook, and taking notes in lecture. To be successful, you need to find what works best for you. Whether you are listening, reading, or studying, you need to be aware of your physical environment as well as your state of mind. Distractions will affect your studying and the amount of information you retain. Here’s some information that can help you be more successful and efficient while attending class and when studying for quizzes and exams.

Studying

Many agree that the most effective studying happens in short, manageable “chunks of time” – 45 to 60 minutes at a time; studying for several hours without breaks is not an effective study strategy for retaining information. Your brain becomes full of information and struggles to absorb and process any more after an hour or so. When you can’t remember what you just read or feel you can’t concentrate another minute, it’s time to take a break, one that involves getting up and doing another activity for at least 10-15 minutes.

You should also vary your study method. You can read, do flashcard review, complete the textbook’s chapter quiz, discuss the material with a classmate, or ask someone to quiz you on the material you read. If there are review questions at the end of the chapter, take the time to write the answers out. You’re more likely to remember the material if you vary the study materials and methods that you use.

Many nursing students find that forming study groups is a very effective way to study. They force you to be disciplined, as everyone is responsible for being up-to-date on the material. When there are concepts that you’re not quite getting, your fellow students can help explain them to you. These groups are also a great place for brainstorming and creating mnemonics and associations that will help you remember. You’ll spend lots of time memorizing things, so the more help you have with that, the better.

You may find that study strategies used in the past aren’t the best strategies for your nursing classes, so you’ll need to try different methods to retain the information. Whenever possible, watch or participate in a demonstration of material you need to know, and take the lead on setting up discussion groups with other classmates to talk about and quiz each other over material covered in the classroom, lab, or clinical site. Doing so will help with retention.

Reading Textbooks

Your classes will require the use of textbooks and sometimes supplemental texts or web resources. Before the quarter begins, you should review them. Once the quarter starts, it’s important to refer to your syllabi and confirm with your instructor which book(s) will be the primary text for the quarter and concentrate your efforts on those course materials. Ask your instructor if you are expected to read the primary nursing textbook from cover to cover. Some instructors may want you to think of your nursing textbook as a reference, a source to review when you do not understand the material addressed in lecture or covered in the clinical. Other instructors will rely heavily on the material in the textbook. It’s critical to know what material you are responsible for and what each of your instructor’s expectation is.

There are a number of textbook reading strategies that you may adopt to get the most out of your reading. Two of them are the PARROT system and the SQ3R method. PARROT is an acronym that stands for Preview, Ask & Activate, Read, Recite, Organize, and Test. SQ3R is a reading strategy formed from its letters: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. Both help you to see how much time and effort you need to invest in your reading assignments. It’s vital for you to adopt a reading strategy to make sure that your time is spent productively, especially if the amount of your assigned reading seems daunting. One of these may help.
PARROT System—Preview, Ask & Activate, Read, Recite, Organize, Test

**Preview:** This step involves looking over the entire reading assignment to familiarize yourself with the concepts that will be covered and the length of the reading assignment. Previewing involves skimming the major headings, illustrations, charts, figures and anything else that stands out from the text. If there is a summary, you should read it. This helps you prepare for what’s to come and understand how concepts relate to one another. As you preview, you’ll begin to determine how many pages you can read in 45-60 minutes and how familiar you are with the topics.

**Ask & Activate:** As you preview the material and prepare to read, it’s important to formulate questions based on the topics and subheadings. Ask yourself if anything is familiar based on your prior knowledge on the subject. Ask yourself what you can expect to learn or what you need to find out. This creates a purpose for you to begin reading. Determine the number of pages you hope to cover within the 45-60 minute time frame and where you’ll stop reading for your break. You may decide to skim sections of material that you already know.

**Read:** When you read the section that you’ve selected, do so without a highlighter or pen in hand. Don’t take notes or highlight on your first reading because everything seems important the first time you read it. There is a tendency to over highlight or take notes on information that is not important or that you already know.

**Recite:** Reciting involves stopping to check your comprehension by saying aloud, if possible, a summary of the material you have just read, preferably in your own words. The objective of this step is to help you make personal connections to the information in the textbook. As you recite or explain the material you read to yourself, you should be taking note of how the information is organized.

**Organize:** At this step, you should organize the information in a format that will help you better comprehend and study. This may involve creating an outline, developing study or flash cards, constructing a concept map, taking Cornell notes, or some other method. It’s suggested that you don’t take notes on material you already know as it’s not necessary. Focus on devising ways to remember complex information and materials or concepts that you’ll need to know.

**Test:** You don’t know what you know until you actually test yourself. Use the study questions and/or quiz questions at the end of the chapter, or go on-line to complete the chapter quiz to determine what information you have retained. You can also create your own questions by forming the headings, subheadings, italicized, and bolded words into questions. If you are able to answer all the questions successfully, you’re ready to move on to the next reading assignment. If you get some answers wrong, you only have to go back to the section of the chapter that you got wrong. Don’t read information you already know!

SQ3R Reading Method—Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review

**Survey or Scan the chapter before you read:** Take a look at the title, headings, subheadings, captions under pictures, charts, graphs and maps. Review the chapter questions or teacher-made study guides. Look at the introductory and concluding paragraphs in each section and the chapter summary. Doing this will give you an idea of the information you’ll find in the chapter.

**Question while you are surveying:** Turn the title, headings, and/or subheadings into questions and see if you can answer any of them. Read questions at the end of the chapters or after each subheading to see what you already know. Ask yourself, “What did my instructor say about this chapter or subject when it was assigned?” and “What do I already know about this subject?”

**Read:** Look for answers to the questions you raised, and answer the questions at the beginning or end of chapters. Take the time to reread the captions under pictures, graphs, etc., and note all the underlined, italicized, bold printed words or phrases. Stop and reread parts which are not clear or are difficult to understand. Read only a section at a time and recite after each section. Take notes, highlight, and make notes in the margins as you read using one of these effective note-taking methods: charts, which allow visual learners to see relationships and differences; key words, which help define terminology, phrases, names and people; outlines, which organize information into clusters or under separate headings; and flash cards.

**Recite after you’ve read a section:** Orally ask yourself questions about what you have just read, or summarize what you read in your own words and say it out loud. Find a classmate who is willing to ask you questions, discuss the main points of the chapter with you, or to whom you can verbally explain the information. The more senses you use, the more likely you are to remember what you read; quadruple strength learning involves seeing, saying, hearing, and writing!

**Review: an ongoing process**
After you have read and recited the entire chapter, write questions in the margins for those points you have highlighted or underlined. If you took notes while reciting, write questions for the notes you’ve taken in the left hand margins of your notebook. When you have time to study, page through the text and/or your notebook to re-acquaint yourself with the important points. Cover the right hand column of your text/notebook and orally ask yourself the questions in the left hand margins. Orally recite or write the answers from memory.
Other ways to review include developing mnemonic devices for material which needs to be memorized, and making flash cards for material or questions you find difficult to remember. After you have done so, alternate between your flash cards and notes and test yourself (orally or in writing) on the questions you formulated. If you skim through the material or use your flashcards throughout the week, you’ll be ready for your exams when they are given. You can also try randomly selecting a previous chapter to review throughout the semester on a weekly basis by taking the chapter quiz. This will help you keep information from the beginning of the semester fresh and lessen the amount of review for your final exam.

Your Lectures

You should try to complete your weekly reading assignments prior to your lecture. If you don’t make it through all of the assigned pages, anything you can read prior to class will help. Make note of concepts you don’t understand in the textbook, and ask your instructor for clarification of the textbook material in the next class. Even if you don’t understand the reading assignment, by doing the reading prior to your lecture, you’ll have had exposure to the content. Subsequently, the content of the lecture may be easier for you to understand or be more meaningful since the lecture isn’t the first time you’ve heard or seen the material.

Concentration in Lectures

If your lectures are long and you’re having trouble concentrating, take an unofficial break. While you may not want to miss important information, it may be more beneficial for you to leave a lecture for a few minutes. If you’re fighting sleep during a lecture or are unable to concentrate, you are already missing the lecture! Leaving the room for a few minutes to get energized is more advantageous for you than fighting to stay awake.

Taking Notes During Lecture

The PowerPoint slides that the nursing faculty produces can be large in number, and the complexity of the information may be great. If you print them out, print the handouts two slides per page so the images are larger and easier to read. There will also be more white space for your notes.

Don’t take notes on information you already know. If the content of the lecture is material that you are comfortable with, sit back and listen to the lecture. There might be a point or two that the instructor makes that you may want to note, but you should not be attempting to write down everything that is said. That activity is not one that you will benefit from.

As a student in lecture, your notes should clarify a point you did not understand in the textbook, or explain a nursing process concept that you struggled with during clinical. Ask questions if you are confused. Be a proactive learner and listen to the lecture.

There are a number of note taking methods you can use. One option is the Cornell Method shown below. Notes are taken in class, and the cues and summary are done after class when you are reviewing the material.

Two more note taking methods you can try are mind mapping and the concept mapping method. Mind mapping allows you to quickly identify and understand the structure of a subject. You can see the way that pieces of information fit together, as well as record the raw facts contained in normal notes.
The concept map is similar to the mind map in that it shows the relationships among the pieces of information. It differs from mind mapping, however, in that it uses a linear style rather than a random style. This note-taking method is ideal for those who like to see both the big picture as well as the structure of the information pieces.

Note-taking methods help you organize the material you have to learn. Good note-taking takes practice, and you have to find a method that works for you. You might find that a combination of 2 or more of these work for you. Once you figure out what works for you, stick with it!

**Getting the Most from Your Studying**

It’s important to understand and be honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses as a student. You’ll need to put into practice academic and life behaviors that will increase your success in earning a passing grade each semester. The objective of studying is to retain information, and your ability to remember is affected by many factors such as distractions, stress, interest in the material, level of motivation, and time of day. To ensure your success, be sure to know yourself and what is best for you!

Here are some tips to help you get the most from your studying:

- Don’t study in a place that has distractions for you. This could be a person, technology (iPod, texting, etc.), or a place! Select a study location that will not distract you from your task.

- Know your high energy and low energy time of day. If you’re not a morning person, don’t try to study first thing in the morning.

- Eat well and get some exercise. Practice the healthy lifestyle your future profession encourages others to do!

- Do not skimp on sleep. You should be getting on average at least 6 hours of sleep each day. Lack of sleep worsens your emotional state, your ability to concentrate, and feelings of anxiety.

- Don’t sweat the small stuff. Accept that during the semester you may not be able to maintain the same level of commitment to life’s daily chores. The house can stay messy and dinner can be a sandwich. Don’t let yourself get distracted by busywork instead of meaningful study and preparation for your class or clinical.

- Ask for help! Your instructors are the first people you need to speak with if you are struggling. Find out what additional resources are available to help you and take advantage of them!

- Attempt to maintain balance in your life. All work and studying is not healthy, so try to set aside time each day for doing something for you.