

Highlighting

Many students use highlighting as a reading tool. However, despite its popularity, highlighting tends not to be a very effective reading strategy. This handout shares effective reading strategies that you can use instead of or in addition to highlighting and shares tips for highlighting well.

The temptation of highlighting

Why do students highlight? Usually students highlight because they want to focus on the important parts of the text and highlight—literally and figuratively—those parts for later study. The problem is that instead of *thinking critically* about the content, they primarily spend their mental energy *sorting* the content into what's important and what's not. Focusing on which details to highlight can get in the way of a deeper understanding of the big picture.

In addition, many students who highlight while reading then use these highlighted sections of the text as the main substance of their studying, rereading this content as their primary study strategy. Rereading in this way can contribute to illusions of competence—the feeling that we know more than we actually know. Why? After looking at content that's phrased a particular way and presented on the same part of a page a couple of times, that content can pretty quickly become familiar to a reader. Many of us confuse this familiarity with a good understanding of the material. And even if we *remember* or even *understand* these highlighted nuggets, there's no indication that we're seeing the bigger picture and are able to *apply*, *analyze*, or *evaluate* the material—the types of higher order thinking that professors usually invoke in their exam questions.

Effective reading strategies

As the paragraph above explains, highlighting isn't 100% bad in and of itself, depending on *what* students highlight and *how* they use that content later. Some students like highlighting or underlining because it helps them do something with their hands and become more engaged with the text. If that's you, great—don't stop if it works for you. But read ahead to find out how you can do more to engage while reading and studying.

Effective strategies to use when reading are ones that engage your brain in deep thinking about the text. Here are just a few ideas:

Preview the text. Before starting to read, look through the chapter and note text features like headings, bold words, charts, graphs, images, and end of chapter questions. Use this information to form an idea of what the chapter is going to focus on.

Know your purpose. Set a purpose for reading before you start. (Think about what you need to be able to know or do after reading). Keep that purpose in mind while you read and check to see if you have reached it by the end.

Annotate. Take brief notes in your own words about the main concepts and key words in the margins of your text. This is a quick and engaging way to take notes.

Ask and answer questions. Turn headings into questions and then answer them as you read. Form questions while you read and try to answer them later. Answer questions provided by the book.

Summarize. Stop after every paragraph or page and write a brief summary of the main concepts in your own words. Summarizing can be more effective than highlighting or annotating because it helps you better gauge what you do and don't understand about a reading.

Highlighting tips

- Only highlight after you've reached the end of a paragraph or a section. Stop and think about what you read and determine the main concepts before you highlight. This will help you pinpoint key concepts and decrease mindless highlighting.
- Limit yourself to highlighting one sentence or phrase per paragraph. Look for the sentence that best expresses the main concept.
- Highlight key words and phrases instead of full sentences. When looking back over these words and phrases, quiz yourself on them before reading further.
- Consider color-coding: choose one color for definitions and key points and another color for examples.
- Using your own words, write summaries of the key concepts you've highlighted in the margins or in a separate set of notes.

Check out these handouts from the Learning Center page that offer more detail on effective reading strategies:

- Reading Comprehension Tips
- Reading Textbooks Effectively
- Taking Notes While Reading
- Annotating Texts
- Study Harder, Not Smarter
- Higher Order Thinking
- Concept Maps

Works consulted

Dembo, M. and Seli, H. (2013). *Motivation and learning strategies for college success: A focus on self-regulated learning*. (4th ed.). (2013). New York: Taylor & Francis.

Holschuh, J. and Nist, S. (2000). *Active learning: Strategies for college success*. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon.

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