

## Literacy Development

# Textbook Survival Strategies

## Smart Ways to Help You Understand What You Read



### Getting Smart at Reading

Reading is one of the smartest thing you can do to get ahead in life. But if you don't have a lot of experience with texts, reading can be boring, overwhelming, and exhausting. Textbooks in particular are a huge hurdle to success for those who are not used to them or who hate the whole idea of a textbook. This is true not only for kids in high school but for college and university students as well.

Fortunately, psychologist, educators, and researchers have studied the problem and figured out a way to make textbook reading easier. The following tips and strategies are designed for college students but they should work for you as well.

### The Most Important Textbook Survival Strategies

1. Get the Big Picture
2. Activate your Background Knowledge
3. Navigate the Chapter
4. Getting It Straight: Main Ideas and Details
5. Read and Think
6. Discover the Logic
7. Outline to Help You Remember
8. Manage the Assignment

# 1

## Get the Big Picture

### What do you mean?

The worst thing you can do is to start reading the textbook and just keep going. Smart people try to get their minds ready and build what's called a "schema" in their brains to hook information onto. So the first thing you do is THINK about the BIG IDEA.

### Why?

If you don't understand the big idea that's part of each chapter, you probably will get lost in the details. You may get frustrated or disgusted and give up. Stopping a minute to get the Big Idea will create a folder in your brain where you can put the information and find it again when you need it. Trying to absorb isolated facts is like sticking a hundred Post-its into your brain – no matter how many more you add, the information will never make sense.

### How?

First, look at the title of the chapter. Look at the key words, don't just read them; think about them. This is similar to the kind of "predicting" you do in novel studies. Of course, you can't make a prediction or get the big picture if you don't know the definition of a Key Word in the title. Not knowing is not a problem, just look up the word or ask someone. However, carrying on without knowing a key concept or word can get you into trouble since you may start out confused and get more confused as you go along.

## Whole Class Activity

Look at the following key words taken from the index of a social studies text. What do the individual words mean (a treaty? Aboriginals? Peoples). Can you guess what each chapter may be all about? Choose a set of words and in TWO MINUTES write down an explanation of each word and your prediction.

- **Treaties** with **Aboriginal Peoples**
- The **Steel Ribbon**
- The **Sod House Frontier**
- The **North West** Rebellion

# 2

## Activate Background Knowledge

### What does that mean?

You know you can't do much work on a computer unless a program, such as Microsoft Word or PowerPoint is running. Your brain is the same way. It has to be switched on and a couple of programs need to be running before you can understand anything. For reading, the most important programs in your brain are MEMORY and PROBLEM SOLVING. Your memory stores all you know, but much of that knowledge is passive. It won't become activated unless you press the problem solving key that allows you to access what you already know and add information to important folders in your memory.

### Why is it important?

You must activate your background knowledge to understand what you read because you can't learn anything unless you already know it, or something very similar to it. Sounds strange, doesn't it? But it's true. In order to learn new information, we have to connect it to old information or else it just falls through the cracks. For example, when you make a prediction about what will happen in a novel, where does that prediction come from? Do you just pull it out of the air? (Well, maybe you do.) But, most of the time, the prediction is based on what you already know –something you've experienced or heard somewhere or something else you've read. Activating your background knowledge opens a folder in your brain and creates branches or hooks that you can hang new information on. It also creates pathways (like roads or railway tracks) that allow you to connect different pieces of information to each other.

### How?

Look at some other textbook chapter headings and the key words in them. What do you already know about the key words? What do you think the chapter will be all about? Also, given what you already know about the world, why would this be important to you as a person or to the country in which you live?

# Your Turn

## Using a Concept Map

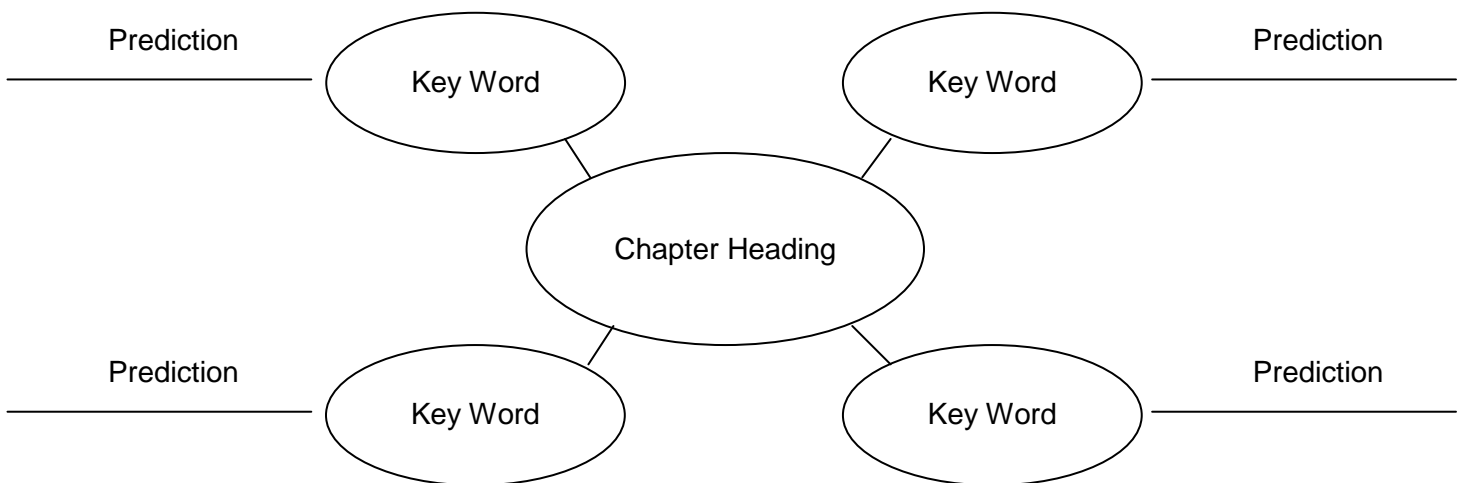
Think about the words and concepts in the list below. Choose **one** or **more** heading from the list and think about the information and ideas associated with the heading. Then think about your predictions for what will appear in the chapter. Write down your ideas

**Group Activity:** Work with your partners and put your ideas together in a concept map. Make sure you have both key words that will appear and sentences that reflect your predictions. Use a concept map similar to the one below to capture everyone's ideas. You can create your own map or use one of the models your teacher can show you.

## Sample Chapter Headings

1. War in the Air and at Sea
2. The North West Mounted Police
3. Workers Demand Change
4. Confederation Discussed and Delayed

### Concept Map



## Your Turn Again

Now try activating your background knowledge for other chapter headings. Think about each sample chapter heading below. Write down related words or concepts and make predictions. Your teacher will decide if you should work individually or in small groups and how many topics you should try to tackle. Be prepared to compare your answers to those of other people in the class. Draw concept maps to help you organize your thoughts.

Think about why the information in the chapter might be important or how it may relate to the present day.

<b>Key Words in the Chapter Title</b>	<b>Related words and ideas that come to mind</b>	<b>Questions or predictions</b>	<b>Why this would be important</b>
<b>War in the Air and at Sea -</b>			
<b>The North West Mounted Police</b>			
<b>Workers Demand Change</b>			
<b>Confederation Discussed and Delayed</b>			
<b>Women Demand change</b>			
<b>War Breaks Out</b>			
<b>The Push to Nationhood</b>			
<b>Confederation Investigated</b>			

# 3

## Navigate Each Chapter

### What does that mean?

Modern textbooks are not linear. They don't just start with one idea and then move to the next in an orderly fashion. Young people are used to video games and fast moving TV shows. They are used to taking in many different pieces of information all at once. Modern textbooks often present several pieces of information on a single page, including: things you need to know, things you need to think about, skills that will help you learn, and stories you might find interesting.

### Why is it important?

If you are a “novice” textbook reader (soon to be an expert), you might find the jumble of pictures, texts and charts confusing rather than enlightening or entertaining. Your brain may scream “Too much information!” and you may give up. But you can tame the beast and get the most out of each section by knowing what kind of information appears where. After all, you’ve figured out how most websites work and you can use that knowledge to get a handle on the organization of your textbook.

### How?

Don't read yet! I know you never thought we would tell you that, but here it is. Don't read. Skim and scan instead to get a sense of how the chapter is organized. Flip through the pages and try to get a sense of what the authors were thinking. After all, they organized the book in a way that they thought would help you. But, in order for their intentions to work, you need to unravel the mystery of the chapter's layout and organization.



## Let's Take a Closer Look

Now take a closer look at each page. Notice how each section uses different kinds of text. Some sections may be stories or biographies, others use graphics such as maps or timelines; still others may take a story from the news.

### Types of Text and Illustrations

- news stories
- biographies,
- time lines
- maps,
- photos to illustrate an idea,
- background readings and more
- stories that connect the past and present

Page #	What's the heading for the page? What kind of text is it?	What kind of information can you expect to find here?

# 4

## Getting It Straight: Main Ideas and Details

### What do you mean?

Getting an overview of the chapter and skimming and scanning to create a folder in your mind gets your brain ready to take in information. This is what you did in the earlier strategies. But now you need to dig in and get a hold of the ideas, facts, and examples that are presented in each chapter.

### Why

If you are a novice textbook reader, it's easy to get stuck in details and get overwhelmed with the task. If you can get a hold of the main idea, it gives you a hook in your brain to hang the rest of the information on. Once you know the main idea, it is much easier to understand what the chapter is all about and remember details.

### How?

The main idea is really just the summary of a paragraph. Lucky for you, in many textbooks the main idea is really easy to find. Look at the beginning of a chapter in the selected textbook. The authors often state the main idea of a chapter in a short introduction.

## Your Turn

### Find where the key information is hidden

Look at the selected text. Where does the summary/main idea appear? Be prepared to give examples.

- In the beginning of each paragraph?
- At the end of each paragraph?
- Somewhere in the middle?
- There is no main idea.
- There may be a main idea but I can't find it.

The main idea (in your own words):

---

---

---

Once you have the main idea down, the heavy lifting begins. You need to find out what happened, who it happened to and when, and why anyone should care. To understand details, you can no longer rely on skimming and scanning or on your background knowledge alone. You have to create NEW knowledge and that's hard work. There is no way around it.

# 5

## Who, What, Where: Think While You Read

### What do you mean?

Remember we talked about reading as problem solving? The only way to understand new information is to constantly think, make connections, and stop to think what it is that the author is telling you.

### Why is it important?

Your mind needs to be actively working while you read, or else you might as well put the book under your pillow and hope that the information will magically seep into your brain.

### How

Luckily, there are some tricks you can use to help you stay on track and think while you read. If your mind wanders, stop and reread the previous paragraph to help you focus.

Here are some of the tricks you can use:

[Read only one paragraph and make sure you understand what's going on. Summarize the information to yourself or to others.](#)

Think about things you already know and congratulate yourself. Then look for surprises in the things you didn't know (your mind likes surprises and remembers them). For example, you probably already know that there is a railroad that connects the East with the West. But you may not know who worked on the railroad or that the workforce included workers who had come all the way from China. So, that may be a surprise. Make a note of it and think about why that may be.

[Now get all your facts straight. Ask yourself:](#)

- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?

## Your Turn

From the selected textbook, write down the chapter and sections your teacher wants you to read. Then fill in what happened to whom, why, and how in the chart below.

**Book Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Chapter:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Section:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Section:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Section:** \_\_\_\_\_

Who? \_\_\_\_\_

What? \_\_\_\_\_

When? \_\_\_\_\_

How? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Why is this important? \_\_\_\_\_

## Your Turn: Summarize

What was the main idea in your section? What point did the writers try to make. What details do you think are important to remember? What do you think are the three most important points to remember about your section? Talk about these and see if you agree.

Work in a group and summarize your section. Add some details that you think people should remember. Then report your summary to others in the class.

Try to make the information interesting and provide enough examples so others can remember.

Section: \_\_\_\_\_

### Section Summary

# 6

## Look for Clues to Discover Logical Patterns

### What Do You Mean?

Looking for logical patterns means looking for the relationship between ideas. It also means discovering how information in a section is organized so that your mind can grasp what's going on. For example, some paragraphs describe a sequence or give explanations. Others compare and contrast, give reasons, or analyze what's happening. Luckily, there are often clues on the page that help you figure out relationships and give you a clue as to what to expect in a chapter.

### Why are patterns or relationships important?

Our minds cannot understand isolated ideas. We may remember them for a minute but then they disappear from our memory. The trick to understanding and remembering ideas is to discover the relationships between ideas and pay attention to the connections.

### How?

Sometimes the connections between ideas are obvious; at other times, you need to discover them. Luckily, sometimes there are language clues in the text or in the heading that tell you what to expect.

### Your Turn

Think about the following language cues and fill in the form.

Clue word or phrase	What can you expect next?	Other words that give similar clues
However		
At least 3 important factors		
During the 1980s and 90s		
“Recently” or “formerly”		
In Great Britain		
There are some very important reasons why		

## Your Turn

Match the logic pattern with the chapter section.

Example of Logic Patterns and Organization of Ideas

1. Explains and describes events or people
2. Compares and contrasts
3. Explains a problem
4. Describes an event or a person
5. Explains cause and effect
6. Shows an outline (concept map) to show how information is organized
7. Describes a sequence
8. Makes connections between past or present
9. Describe reasons as to why something happened
10. Provides lots of examples and details
11. Uses metaphor or analogies

Look at the sample section headings below and predict what logic patterns will be used.

<b>Chapter and Section</b>	<b># of Logic Pattern or Organization of ideas</b>	<b>Summarize the Point Being Made</b>
<b>The Last Spike</b>		
<b>The Pacific Scandal</b>		
<b>Cartoon</b>		
<b>Contract</b>		
<b>Profile</b>		
<b>Tech Link</b>		
<b>Building Problems</b>		
<b>Crossing the Prairies</b>		

# 7

## Outline Each Section to Help You Study for a Test

### What do you mean?

Outlining is nothing more than representing the idea in a chapter or section of a textbook in a graphic format that uses sentences and phrases. You can use either a linear sequential format or a cognitive map to outline the ideas.

### Why is it important?

Eighty percent of what you read you forget right away because it is not organized in your mind (think of isolated Post-Its in your brain) or we don't actively work on understanding the information and remembering key points.

### How do I do it?

You use a few simple steps. Write the Chapter Name on the top of your page and write the section heading below. This is important so that you can find the right information in your notes when it comes to taking a test. Underneath the section heading, write the main point of the section and then add details or examples below.

### Example

**Chapter:** 11-The Steel Ribbon

**Section:** The Dream of a Railway

**The Main Point:** A railway would be built within 10 years.

**Detail # 1:** If B.C. does not get a link to the East, it may join the United States.

**Detail # 2:** They wanted to settle the West with settlers.

**Detail # 3:** A railway would move settlers west and bring products east.

**Detail # 4:** A dream from sea to sea will come true if a railway is built.

**Detail # 5:** A group of business people formed the Canadian Pacific Railway Company.

## Your Turn: Outlining a Section

Your teacher will assign a textbook chapter and section. Write down the main point and then think about the details. Be prepared to explain your section to the rest of the class. Your teacher may assign different sections to different groups

Textbook: \_\_\_\_\_

Chapter: \_\_\_\_\_

Section: \_\_\_\_\_

Main Point: \_\_\_\_\_

Detail # 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Detail # 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Detail # 3: \_\_\_\_\_

Detail # 4: \_\_\_\_\_

### Key Points to Remember (in your own words)

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_