

## Transcript for “Episode 11. College Reading in 5”

### Introduction

Lauren: OK, so when I was in high school, basically I just looked at definitions.

Chantel: College was my first time actually having to read, like, a chapter for each class.

Stephanie: And if we can apply that lens to our everyday lives, we are all readers.

Narrator: Reading is not like a video. You don't just wait for the words to hit your eyes. You don't just watch the sentences roll by between pages 25 and 36. It's not something you sit and wait for it to happen *to* you. You're not in the audience – you're one of the creators.

Even if you haven't read much up until now, or think you're just not a good "natural" reader, there is a lot that you can do to improve. That's because reading ability is trainable and difficulties often result from inexperience. We've got five strategies here to improve your ability to read almost anything.

### 1. Match Your Approach to the Source

Chantel: I'm still struggling with how to pick out the important parts of the reading.

Stephanie: I think when you read you're reading for something... what is it that I'm trying to learn and garner from this?

Narrator: It's not very helpful to read everything the same way. You want to match your approach to the source. And there are three main kinds of text sources in college courses: textbooks, other nonfiction, and fiction. Understanding the purpose of each type helps you improve how you read it and where you focus your attention.

Textbooks are more likely to be assigned in introductory 100- and 200-level classes. Those classes are designed to build your basic knowledge of a discipline. Textbook reading, then, introduces you to a lot of concepts and facts. They explain what these key concepts mean, why they're important, and how they fit together. These are the building blocks of the class and the discipline it represents. So when you're reading a textbook, that's the stuff you're looking for - the key concepts and relationships.

Other non-fiction reading, like a book, essay, or article published by a scholar on their research, offers ideas or findings to spur further thought. This is more for introducing you to debates in a particular field. That kind of reading is supposed to encourage you to develop your own thinking and opinions. So when you're reading this kind of stuff, you're looking for the writers' arguments and what kinds of evidence they use to support them. Ultimately, you're using them to figure out what *you* think.

Finally, there's fiction reading like literature, poetry, and drama. Here the point is not only to digest the plot, characters, and stuff like that, but also what it *means*. What does the work express? What does it have to say about the particular situations, ideas, and emotions it grapples with? How does it speak to the human condition in general? So when you're reading fictional creative work, you're trying to interpret its meaning and significance.

OK, but what about all the time college reading takes and dealing with your attention span?

## 2. Track Time and Attention Span

Chantel: I space out when I'm reading... I have to put my phone, I have to put all of that away just to focus.

Stephanie: A lot of it is really about the space that you're in, too... You know your triggers! So you try to kind of create that environment ahead of time. But, you know, it's just a natural thing. Don't beat yourself up, sometimes take a second away and go back to it.

Narrator: College reading is complex and requires a lot of mental processing work. Save it for your time of peak energy in the day, not when you're ready to go to sleep. Pick a conducive environment, too. For many people, that's a quiet space where they won't get easily interrupted or distracted.

Another issue with college reading is that it's a kind of "X-factor" in your time - impossible to schedule for because you're not sure how long it might take. So try this: time your reading rate per page for each course text. That way, when you get a reading assignment, you can reasonably estimate how long it will take you. Now you can give it the time it needs.

When you're reading, avoid the distraction of "How much left?" Try only allowing yourself to look at the page number and time every 2-5 pages. Observe your thoughts. When they wander, notice it, pull them back to the page, and quickly review what you might have missed as your eyes kept going.

But is there anything you can do to make this easier up front? Absolutely! Check out the next section on "Previewing."

## 3. Preview

Stephanie: When you say preview you mean just look over the text before? Yeah, I mean, of course, I think we all pick the cover up, we read through it, we flip through the pages, the little information on the inside or the back of the cover - I do that all the time.

Narrator: Many students struggle with reading because they take an "ant's-eye-view" of the text. They crawl through it word-by-word rather than a bird's-eye view, where they see the bigger picture.

Previewing a text helps give you that bigger picture before you even start - a kind of mental map of the territory. Or you can think of it like a filing system where you will store the details of what you're about to read.

Here's how you do it - ask yourself: How is the piece organized? Is there a clear structure - sections that will help you? Then, look at the:

- title
- introduction
- opening paragraphs and last paragraph
- boldface headings
- other terms in bold
- first sentences of paragraphs
- graphs, charts, and pictures

Try and get as much information as you can from this survey.

OK, now you've previewed the reading. It's time to get to the heart of it. One of the best ways to do that is to take notes. Check out the next section.

#### 4. Take Notes (Beyond Highlighting)

Chantel: I look over my notes, my annotated notes, before class or before an exam and then I'm like, OK, this is what is important in this section.

Stephanie: I am a note-taker. Like I said, especially with difficult texts, but sometimes I'll be reading and there's a cool quote... I always read with something to write by me... A lot of times I'll write on the tabs, like they have the tabs that you can write on. I'll put a tab on the book, the page number, and then write the note... sometimes I get real extreme and color-code for different things.

Narrator: When you take notes on your reading, the basic idea is this: When you go back to study, you want to go right to your notes without having to re-read the original piece. It's often helpful to avoid highlighting. People end up highlighting too much and then it's no longer serving the purpose of taking notes, which is to pull out the essential stuff. Annotation is frequently much more effective.

Try thinking like a detective, a lawyer, or a judge. Here's what we mean: sometimes you're the detective, and you're digging out information and ideas. Sometimes you're the lawyer, putting together arguments and connecting it with the wider world. And sometimes you're the judge, taking a position. Ideally, you're kind of doing all of this at the same time.

The Detective

Here's what you want your detective to find:

-What's the author's point? What's the main idea, the central argument? You might star, use a "T" for thesis, or otherwise label it.

-Try underlining or bracketing major supporting or subordinate points, circling the page number so you can find these spots easily later.

-What's the evidence? Label key items of support or examples, perhaps with "example of" or "support 1," "support 2," etc.

### The Lawyer

Ask yourself: How does this relate to other course materials, bigger issues, and my own life? In a sense, you're "talking back" to the reading. Remember, it's like a conversation. Write down the connections you're making in the margins.

### The Judge

Is there an argument or a position in this reading? If so, what do you think about it? Do you wholly (or in part) agree or disagree? Why?

### 5. Make It Personal.

Stephanie: I see it somewhat as a political endeavor. Because the very person of who I am in this country - at some point, to read was against the law for me. So that edge lends me a really exciting way to engage almost anything, for lack of... so it's just like "Ugh, science!" Well, who are these people? So why did they start this work? And so the back story, for me, enters in the story and then I'm in the story because I'm asking these questions in relation to who I am and how others are positioned... So I could read Chaucer, I could read Shakespeare, you know, his works, I could read Harper Lee and it's still - I could ask the same questions.

### Recap

Narrator: So these are five strategies to get you going strong on college reading. Put these five together, and you'll see that college reading is like a lot of other things - not only does it get easier with practice, but it becomes a lot more fun, interesting, and useful. Ultimately, college reading is about this: how to get from words to the ideas. Until next time...

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Music

"Soukora" by Ali Farka Touré with Ry Cooder from *Talking Timbuktu* © 1994 World Circuit

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