

IMPROVING STUDENT UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY TEXTBOOKS  
A PRACTICAL APPROACH

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Although study skills centers and basic reading and writing programs have proliferated in our universities, history professors must still contend with the immediate reading problems of students. Typically, we stress (and test) mastery of historical content; we may be unaware that problems with the more fundamental reading process can prevent that understanding. We assign textbooks for background information and course continuity, and assume that students understand what they read. If they do not, we may mutter about lack of preparation in the high schools or point to the evil influence of television, and assign them low grades. What we do not do--what we have not been trained to do--is to help students master the process of reading and understanding history. What we offer below, then, are some specific, straight-forward techniques and suggestions for professors of history who have no background in reading instruction that can help students significantly increase their comprehension of history textbooks.

The typical classroom approach may actually exacerbate the student's reading problems. The most common error is failure to specifically explain the purpose of a given textbook assignment. Is the material necessary background information for a given lecture? Is it information that will not be explicitly covered in the classroom? Does it offer an alternative explanation, or emphasize a different set of historical factors, than does the professor? The student must be aware in advance of the exact reason for any reading assignment.

A related problem is failure to get immediate feedback--prior to an examination. Once we have adequately explained the purpose for reading, we may too readily assume that students have comprehended the necessary concepts. Our experience has shown that students in most cases do not know how to recognize, let alone understand, key concepts in the text. While professors may have no trouble identifying and interrelating key assertions of the author, and attaching significant details to these assertions, students have not been taught to do this. History professors can, in fact, train students in this vital reading technique--while they are teaching history.

A proper textbook is an obvious--though often overlooked--necessity for improving comprehension. Deterioration of basic skills in recent years has caused authors and publishers to simplify their texts, to talk down to the student, in a desperate attempt to increase understanding. In our view, this is a mistaken approach. One of the key objectives in teaching history is relating general themes with specific facts. "Simplified" textbooks tend to overgeneralize, and such overgeneralization hinders, rather than enhances, comprehension. A good textbook will balance generalization and supporting factual detail, and the instructor must then help to develop students skill in interrelating these two factors.

Effective reading involves the techniques of previewing, paraphrasing, analyzing, and reviewing. If students bring the assigned text to class one day a week during the first part of the course, the history professor can quite easily teach these techniques as suggested below. Few class hours will be "lost" since historical content is the vehicle for teaching the reading process.

1. Previewing. Many history courses begin with a period before civilization actually develops, an era referred to as "pre-history." In the reading

process, too, there is a necessary preparatory stage of "pre-reading" or "previewing." Once professors are aware of the necessity of such preparation for the student, they can provide it in the classroom.

Previewing involves a brief look at the material to note major chronological divisions, geographical areas, and significant historical events and personalities. At least for the first few chapters, the professor should explicitly point out to the student some "obvious" facts--obvious, that is, to those experienced in reading historical material. He can show, for example, how all of Greek history before 800 B.C. is treated in two pages, while the 5th century B.C. rates a dozen. He can mention that military or political figures are given more extensive treatment than, say, the intellectuals of the age. He can explain how maps and illustrations supplement the written material. Our experience has shown that the beginning student must be made aware of these basic points.

2. Paraphrasing. In the classroom, the professor can also go beyond this preparatory stage and aid the student in the actual comprehension of the historical material. The instructor should be aware that most students simply do not understand the purpose of the basic unit of writing--the paragraph. Students need to learn that each paragraph involves an assertion and supportive details. The recognition of these elements, of course, is especially necessary for historical material.

Assuming that the instructor has required a textbook with well-written paragraphs, students should be asked to identify the main idea of given paragraphs from the text. They can test their selection by seeing if all other sentences in that paragraph relate to this statement. With the aid of the instructor, students can quickly develop the ability of recognizing and distinguishing key statements and supportive facts. Once students learn to identify the elements of a paragraph, they should begin to paraphrase its meaning. This technique reveals most clearly to the student that education is an active process, that unless they can actually formulate the meaning of paragraphs in their own words, they simply do not understand the material.

Some time spent early in the course going over proper paraphrasing of specific paragraphs in the text will be very effective for future comprehension. A series of paragraphs from the early chapters should be considered in the classroom. After each paragraph, students should compare their paraphrases with the instructor's, or perhaps with other students' work too. They can ask specific questions about where they went wrong (at first, most students are too wordy). Within one class period, we have found, paraphrases become increasingly precise and specific.

It should be pointed out to the student that not all paragraphs are worth paraphrasing. Valuable study time should not be wasted on unimportant sections of assigned reading. In other cases, the concepts may be so simple that the student need only identify the author's meaning.

We do not think that underlining the textbook is an effective technique. Underlining is a passive process that prevents involvement; paraphrasing, either in the form of notebook paragraphs or marginal notes (which have to be far more precise and concise), involves students with the material. It has been our experience that, with a little practice under the professor's direction, most students can eventually write a short phrase about the main idea of each important paragraph in the margin of the text. Such a systematic approach to paraphrasing helps students concentrate on the author's intent and thus understand their history textbook.

3. Analyzing. Whereas paraphrasing techniques emphasize understanding, analysis involves discovering relationships and organizational patterns. When students begin to analyze a text for ideas and organization, they begin to change the relationship originally held with the author. Most students are passive and receptive to the author's point of view because they expect to receive a "lecture" rather than to conduct a dialogue. Once students learn how to analyze what they read, new relationships with the author can occur.

The basic tool for analysis is questioning the author's thesis and rhetoric. What is the author's thesis? Is the rhetorical presentation persuasive? Why was this particular style used? How well is the thesis tested? What ideas and kinds of information does the author include to support this thesis? What knowledge and values does the student bring to the material? Such questioning allows identification of inconsistent reasoning, faulty logic, and poorly developed assertions. It promotes continual testing of the author's thesis against past experience. It helps students become aware of their personal prejudices and lack of knowledge. Thus, teachers must promote questioning skills to help students understand their textbooks. And while detailed examination of the text may appear too clinical or time-consuming to many students, it does shorten later review time.

4. Reviewing. A final stage in the reading process is review. In general, textbooks are edited to present a new topic every two to five pages. As outlined above, students can be taught to read and take margin notes from one such topic to the next. Reviewing then consists of reading the paraphrased margin notes and recalling the supportive details. If the supportive facts can be recalled, the student moves on to the next paragraph. If not, the student rereads the paragraph either for the supporting details or to clarify the margin notes. Using this system, students concentrate on what they do not know rather than spend time studying details they have already acquired.

Our experience has been that, once made aware of the reading process, the history professor can readily acquaint the student with the skills of previewing, paraphrasing, analyzing, and reviewing while teaching his "real" discipline. Most students will move quickly from dependence on the professor to independent readers of history. This can, in fact, relieve a good part of "history anxiety," and so make the whole teaching and learning environment far more enjoyable.