

Getting the most from your textbooks

OVERVIEWING YOUR TEXTBOOKS

As a college student, at the beginning of every semester, you should get to know your way around your new textbooks as quickly and efficiently as possible. Other than instructors, textbooks are the most important sources of information that you use in most of your courses. Thus you want to become very familiar with them in order to save time and feel secure and comfortable when reading them. You accomplish this through the use of overviewing, which is a quick method of getting acquainted with textbooks.

What is overviewing?

Overviewing involves **skimming**, or quickly glancing over, the front and back parts of a textbook in order to find out what it is about, how it is organized, and what aids to understanding are offered to help you comprehend it better. **Aids to understanding** or **learning aids**—which make it easier to use your textbooks—could include appendixes, bibliographies, glossaries, graphic aids, indexes, objectives, outlines, prefaces, previews, questions, reference sources, summaries, tables of contents, and vocabulary lists.

At the very least the front pages of a textbook usually include a title page, table of contents and preface. As you know, the **title page** tells you what the book is about in addition to providing the name of the author, the publishing company, and the edition. The back of the title page gives the copyright date or the date of publication of that particular edition of the book so you know if you are dealing with material that is current. After the title page, you will most often find the **table of contents**, which is a blueprint of the entire book's organization. It lists not only the section and chapter titles, but also all the main headings in each chapter. In short, it tells you more specifically what the textbook is about and helps you understand how the chapter headings are related to one another. For example, if headings such as "Anxiety Disorders," "Schizophrenia," "Anger," and "Depression" are listed under a larger heading like "Understanding Emotional Disorders," you would recognize immediately

that the four subheadings are all examples of emotional disorders. Recognizing these kinds of connections or relationships would help make it easier to understand the chapter when you read it later on.

The **preface**, which generally comes after the table of contents, is also referred to as an introduction. Sometimes it is divided into “To the Instructor” and “To the Student” sections, or it may be a combination of both. Regardless of how it is structured or for whom it is written, the textbook lists the features that make the book noteworthy, tells how the book is organized to help the reader, and lists and explains the aids to understanding. All of this information lets you know what you should accomplish as a result of reading the book and what is provided by the writer to help you to use it more efficiently. Although the table of contents shows what is included in the back part of a textbook, you should take a quick look for yourself.

The back pages of a textbook almost always include an alphabetically arranged **index**, which gives page locations for very specific information. Sometimes the index is divided into name and subject sections, which makes it faster to use. An alphabetically arranged **glossary** is also often found in the back, and it provides definitions of either individual words or combinations of words that fit the context of a given text. Many of those combinations of words will not even be found in a dictionary. For example, the glossary in a biology textbook defines *neutral variation* as “generic variation that provided no apparent selective advantage for some individuals over others.” Although the dictionary provides separate definitions for *neutral* and *variation*, it does not define them in combination. These glossaries give the meaning for specialized terms. They are also quicker to use than a dictionary because you do not have to search through a long list of definitions to find the specific one that fits the subject matter.

A **bibliography** containing sources used by the author to write the book, often supplemented by a list of **reference sources** or **suggested readings**, may be located at the back of a textbook or at the end of each chapter. **Credits** and **notes** are sometimes listed as well. They are all useful if research is necessary in order to read further on a given topic or perhaps to write a paper. On occasion, you can also find an **appendix** that includes supplementary or

additional information such as definitions, experiments, maps, or diagrams that can prove helpful in understanding the subject matter of the text book.

Overviewing takes only a short time, but it is well worth the effort. The sooner you become familiar with a textbook, the better your chances of reading it faster and with much more understanding. Furthermore, your awareness of all the aids to understanding included in the book by the writer should make the whole experience easier and more rewarding—and these elements come in very handy when studying for exams.

ACTIVITY 1

DIRECTIONS. Do an overview of one of the textbooks you are using in any linguistics course, and write a few paragraphs in which you discuss what you learned from your overview.

Adapted from *Critical Reading, Critical Thinking*, Richard Pirozzi, Longman