A Simple SQ3R Reading Method and Study Strategy

by Winston Sieck - February 09, 2018

https://thinkeracademy.com/sq3r/

It’s almost the end of class. Lunch next. You’re so ready to head out.

Then it happens, just before the bell rings. Your teacher assigns a reading from your textbook. Read this section for Thursday, and we’ll have a short quiz.

Sure, you can read the section. But what’s the best way to read and study for that quiz?

You want to do well… though, without spending forever on this homework.

Maybe you should read the section twice over? Or would it be best to take notes while you read?

In fact, there’s an age-old reading strategy you may have heard about, called SQ3R. So, how does it work? And, should you really use it?

What is SQ3R?

SQ3R is a reading strategy first described by Francis Robinson in his 1941 book, Effective Study. The acronym SQ3R stands for Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review.

This 5-step reading method is being taught in middle, junior high and high schools across the country as a way of helping students learn more effectively from readings. Here’s how the 5 steps work:

Survey

The first step in SQ3R is to survey what you are reading. Pay attention to the way the paragraphs are laid out into sections. Glance over any highlighted words to see if they are vocabulary words or if the highlights are added for emphasis. Look at graphs or pictures that may contain additional information and see where they are in relationship to the rest of the page, paragraph or chapter.

Question

That is where the "Q" in SQ3R comes in. During your initial survey of the material, you are encouraged to create questions about the text. These questions not only give you a study guide for later, they help you consider what you already know and how that fits in with what you are about to learn.

Read

Now that you have skimmed the text and created questions, it is finally time to read. At this point you have already created an organized plan for what you are about to learn. You are just plugging in the rest
of the information. Aim to answer the questions you asked in the “Q” step, and write down any additional questions you may have while you are reading.

**Recite**

Once you have finished reading the paragraph, section, page, or chapter, it is time to "test yourself" on what you have learned. Recite involves setting aside the text and saying out loud everything you have learned. Reciting out loud what you have read not only gives you a sound to associate with the reading, it also forces you to solidify the information in your mind.

This step is what really sets SQ3R apart from re-reading or taking notes. Researchers are discovering that the process of testing actually helps you recall information better than if you are not quizzed at all. But you don’t want to have to wait for your teacher to give that pop quiz. Use self-testing as a key learning technique and be ready to nail the quiz.

**Review**

After reciting everything you can remember, it is time to review the text for anything you skipped, didn’t understand or could not recall. This review gives you instant, meaningful feedback about how well you read the material in the first place and how well you recalled what you learned.

**Can a simplified SQ3R help you learn?**

OK, I know what you’re thinking: *That was a lot of steps. No way I’m doing all of that.*

Fortunately, cognitive researchers have uncovered a shortcut to the traditional SQ3R method that helps you remember what you have learned, right when you need to.

Mark McDaniel, Daniel Howard and Gilles Einstein tested a simplified version of the SQ3R method, focusing only on the 3R's. They explain their method and test how well it works in an article titled "The Read-Recite-Review Study Strategy: Effective and Portable," published in *Psychological Science*.

For their study, McDaniel and colleagues gave students brief passages to read. Different groups of students were also asked to use different reading strategies to tackle the content.

- **Re-reading**: One group of students read the passages, and then re-read the text.
- **Note taking**: Another group of students took notes while reading. They also read each passage twice.
- **Simplified SQ3R**: The third group used the read-recite-review steps of the SQ3R method. That is, they read the passage once. Recited all they could remember. Finally, they read the passage again (review).

In one experiment, the reading materials were short, straightforward text passages. In a second experiment, students read longer, more technical pieces. These were more like what you would find in a science or engineering class.
All three groups were given multiple choice and short answer tests. They were also given a tougher test, in which students had to write out all they could remember from the passage. This would be kind of like an essay test.

So, did the 3R reading method work best?

The researchers found that - it depends.

Aghh. Nothing is ever super simple, is it? Relax, it's still pretty easy.

To select a reading strategy, ask yourself:

- How hard is the reading material?
- How tough is the test?

If you answer "difficult" to either of those questions, choose 3R.

For the easier passages in the study, 3R worked the best for the toughest test, where students had to write out what they had learned. However, it didn’t really give a major boost for the easier multiple choice and short answer tests.

Things were different for the longer and more complex passages. When faced with technical reading, the 3R method improved performance across all of the tests.

Oh yeah, more good news. While 3R took a little longer than merely re-reading, it took quite a bit less time than taking notes while reading. It packs a punch, without sucking up all of your free time.

**Put the simplified SQ3R to good use**

One of the biggest drawbacks to using traditional SQ3R is that it takes a while to master the full method. It’s also pretty time consuming to use. By the time you are to the review stage, you have likely skimmed the text two or three times, taken important notes and tested your ability to recall what you have read.

It's no wonder so many students are tempted to skip SQ3R altogether in favor of less time-intensive methods like re-reading.

Using just 3R - the quick and simple version of SQ3R - helps your brain retrieve information shortly after you read it, something that can help you retain more of what you read. Reciting also gives you a chance to test yourself on how well you read and give you a direction for what to cover during your review.

Since research has shown that re-reading something without assessing how well you understood it in the
first place doesn't offer a lot of benefit, reciting is especially important to the review process.

Rather than languishing away reading and re-reading your difficult textbook, give the 3R method a try. Not only will you spend less time studying, you will be surprised at how much better you recall information in that short amount of time.

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