Why SQ3R Works

Many reading and learning skills classes in college include a systematized textbook processing system in their syllabi such as SQ3R, OK5R, SUPER SQUARE, and PQRST. The best known is **SQ3R which stands for survey, question, read, recite, and review.** If you know how and why these study systems work, you are more likely to use one of them in your reading and studying.

As a human being, you inherently strive to "make sense" out of the world to reduce uncertainty concerning the nature of your world. To do this you:

(1) Take in information through your sensory organs;

(2) Process that information via your memory systems;

(3) Structure and categorize the information in the most meaningful manner possible, i.e., so that interrelationships with other structures or categories are immediately apparent to you;

(4) Store information so it will be available for recall and future use.

You are constantly exposed to much more information than your brain can possibly process. Therefore, the rate at which new input from the environment can be injected into your memory system is limited by the rate at which the human brain can filter and process information. Each component of these study systems is designed to facilitate the processing of incoming information so that you can deal with more of it and deal with it more effectively.

The Steps in SQ3R

1. Survey

What it does - Surveying material to be read prepares your mental processing system to receive information to be learned. Surveying provides the basic knowledge required to organize and assimilate (learn) incoming information from reading assignments and notes.

Why do it - If your mental processing system "knows" what to expect in advance, it can understand and store information in a much more efficient manner than if the new information is injected into the system with no forewarning.

2. Question

What it does - This organizes new information and begins attaching it to already existing knowledge. This attachment is an important component of learning.

Why do it - Self-generated questions help increase concentration, reduce the phenomenon of forgetting what was just read, and increase learning speed and recall.

3. Read

What it does - In effective reading, you evaluate and choose the information you need to fill in answers created by the questions you formulated earlier.

Why do it - If you are not actively involved in learning, it is normal for you to have more problems with concentration and the information you do receive may not be stored properly for longer term recall.

4. Recite

The recitation component of SQ3R is the ***most important*** step in SQ3R and any effective study system. ***If recitation is skipped, this system and any other study system will not work very well.***

What it does - If you know that you are going to have to recite answers from memory, you will be **more likely to read actively**. As you read and study notes, you evaluate and select what it is to be recited. Thus, maximum concentration is placed upon the most relevant information in reading assignments and notes that increases learning and recall.

Why do it - A human's memory contains an immediate memory, and short-term memory, and a long-term memory (Kintsch l970, Miller and Johnson-Laird l976). Items must be stored in long-term memory to be available for later recall whether for exams or on the job. Information must be held in the short-term memory about 5 seconds to move that information from short-term toward long-term memory (Simon l969). ***When you recite, information is held in short-term memory about 5 seconds and moves from short-term memory toward long-term memory***. **This is what makes SQ3R work.**

5. Review

Memory research indicates that it is normal for most forgetting to take place shortly after the learning task is completed (Travers l977).

What review does - Immediate review interferes with the *normal forgetting process* and results in more complete retention.

Why review? - Repeated review of material to be learned is essential to learning because it moves information from short-term memory toward long-term memory. Without repeated review, information fades from short-term memory rather quickly.

In summary, study systems like SQ3R strengthen your mental information processing system and forces more efficiency and productivity in learning tasks. This translates into getting more out of the time invested in studying and helps avoid statements like, "I studied for 8 hours for this test and got a terrible grade."