

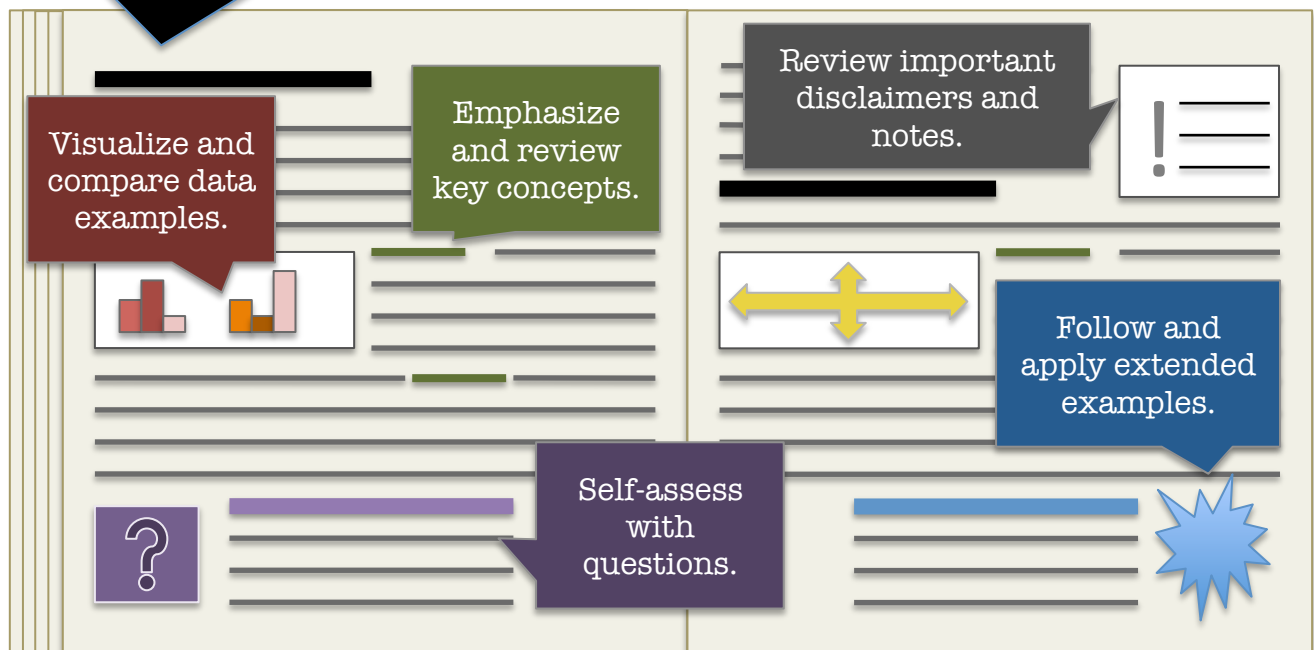
To Text, or Not to Text. That is the question. (with a book, not a phone)

“Do we really need the textbook?”

This increasingly frequent question stems from many factors, from strained education costs and experiences of not cracking a text’s cover to an uncertainty about when and how to use the textbook when assessments are largely off of lectures. How do we acknowledge and meet these frustrations in a way that shows students their required text’s purpose?

Go on a textbook
scavenger hunt.

Discuss with students why you chose the book, and provide direction in how to use it. A scavenger hunt familiarizes students with how to use the text.



For more suggestions and strategies to make sure students are using their textbooks, such as assessment design, visit

oakland.edu/teachingtips

To Text, or Not to Text (with a book, not a phone): That is the question.

When I was a college student (a significant number of years ago), every course I took came with a list of textbooks that was to be purchased prior to the first day of class. I didn't pay attention to the content of the book or its cost. I didn't even look to see if the instructor had marked it "required" or just "recommended." It was officially part of the course material and I anticipated needing all of those resources to be successful. I was an eager and academically-minded (i.e., nerdy) 18-year old freshman, who was fully funded by Mom and Dad, and whose only responsibility was to get good grades.

Now from my vantage point as a full-time professor at the Community College of Rhode Island, I can see that my college situation represents a fairy tale of circumstances that very few of my current students will ever enjoy. Their tuition comes from their salary, not Mom and Dad's, and is just one of their innumerable expenses. They have jobs to go to, bills to pay and children to support, sometimes parents too. Many of today's students have to make tough decisions about whether or not it is truly beneficial to invest in a textbook, not just their money but also their time.

In addition to the high price of textbooks, there seems to be a variety of reasons that students do not use, and therefore frequently decide not to buy, textbooks. First, in many courses, particularly lecture classes, the instructor covers all of the test material during lecture thereby making the textbook redundant. Why should a student "waste" time reading material in the book, when they can listen to it in lecture?

Students don't seem to understand that the purpose of textbooks is to provide an alternate presentation or explanation of the material, as well as a synthesis of concepts that may have been discussed separately in lecture. They can also serve as a reference for finding clarification of concepts that the student may not have fully grasped the first time through in lecture. Ultimately, students don't realize that repetition is a vital tool for learning.

Next, students have limited amounts of time to devote to their classes, so they tend to study their notes instead of reading the textbook. It's hard to deny that it's a more efficient use of time to review concise notes than to read through chunky paragraphs in long chapters. Students rarely consider that by neglecting their text, they are missing out on other content like graphs, tables and pictures. These are extremely valuable sources of information offered in a convenient and condensed presentation (just the way they like it).

Finally, some students quickly become frustrated trying to tackle the text because their reading level and comprehension skills are not compatible with the assigned textbook. When the mechanics of reading are painful to students, most will surely avoid the source of this pain. This problem hints at leniency in enforcing English placement test scores and course prerequisites and is often a larger college issue.

The reasons students don't buy and/or use their textbooks seem clear. So what can instructors do to address this problem beyond marking their text "required" in the bookstore? First, spend a few minutes on the first day of class explaining the reasons you chose the textbook, identify its strengths and weaknesses (nothing is perfect) and discuss the many ways it can benefit the student during the semester, including information about the importance of repetition and alternate explanations, as well as the value of the charts and graphs.

This may give the student an appreciation for the book's value and help them feel less resentful of its cost. Students seem to be naturally repelled by textbooks, so a colleague of mine assigns an activity "scavenger hunt" to help students orient themselves with the book's content and organization. The hope is that by establishing familiarity with the textbook at the semester's start, the student will feel more comfortable using the book for assignments and as a resource as the semester progresses.

A more direct approach is to create assignments that are specific to the book's content. The internet has made this a challenge. Most information is currently what I like to call "Googlable." As a result, many of my reading assignment questions are based on the pictures, diagrams and tables in the book, so the answers are text-specific. Some questions are as simple as "What color is the esophagus in Figure 2.1?" This can only be determined by actually looking at the picture. Although the answer "green" is meaningless, the information they took in when finding that answer is not. In other disciplines, the interpretation or commentary in the book may be specific enough to prevent Googling of the assignment's answers and missing out on all that the textbook has to offer.

A final approach is to include questions on exams that come only from the textbook and are never covered in lecture. I used to threaten to do this, but I quickly realized that it caused unnecessary anxiety among my students. The reality is that my lectures cover everything that I think is important enough to be on the exam. That doesn't mean that I don't expect my students to read their textbook and use it as a resource and study tool. They have text-based "reading assignments" for every chapter of the book we cover worth 5% of their final grade. I can't resist telling them it is the most important "texting" they'll do all semester!

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