**WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING**

**WHAT TO DO TO CLEAR UP CONFUSION**

**1.** **Do not stop immediately**. It is normal to find words and passages that seem unclear. When you read along and find a place that puzzles you, first read ahead a few sentences and then go back a few sentences. Often you will find that the material before and after a passage will help explain it.

**2.** **Think whether it's important** to understand the puzzling passage before you stop and figure it out. When it is important, work on it. When it's not important, skip it and read on. It is NOT important to fully understand a passage when you are scanning rapidly to get a general idea. But it IS important to understand a passage when it talks about things your teacher wants you to learn. And it IS important when it contains a general principle or basic information that you need to understand later material.

**3.** Know that there are **no easy ways to understand**. They all involve more work than reading lightly past the troublesome parts. Accept the fact that you must work harder to understand puzzling parts.

**4.** When a writer gives **examples of concepts** and ideas, study them carefully because they relate ideas to concrete things you can relate to. Do not skip over examples. When you understand examples, you will understand big ideas.

Also study examples of things that the author says you might confuse with the concept. For example, if an author were teaching the concept of a "mammal", he or she might give examples of mammals like dogs, cows, kangaroos, and humans. Then the author might list things that are not mammals--flies, dinosaurs, sharks, snakes, and maple trees.

When you study examples, think how the traits of the definition show up as features of the examples. For instance, mammals have hair. As you think how dogs fit the mammal category, focus on their fur. Talk to yourself. Say, "This part of the example fits this part of the concept." "Dogs' fur fits the defini­tion of mammal because mammals have hair."

**5.** **Go slowly! Make mental images of the meanings.** Read again the puzzling part word for word. Do it slowly. Read with exaggerated emphasis. Give yourself time to think of the meanings of all the words. Think of visual images of what the passage means. And if it's appropriate, think of how something feels. Move your hands and arms the way a chart's line moves up or down. Fantasize how it would feel to be the thing that is talked about. For example, how would an electron feel as it moved through each part of a circuit?

**6.** **Talk to yourself!** This is important. Most people who are highly intelligent do it. As you move through a puzzling passage, translate it into your own words. Do not just stare at the words and sentences without thinking. Do not let your mind be wordless. Think the passage through. Relate it to things meaningful to you. If you are alone, talk out loud. Really! I know people who do it.

**7.** If you find **important words** that you do not know and cannot figure out from the context, then stop reading and **look them up** in the dictionary. If the words are technical words in the course, look them up in the book's glossary. If that does not work, look in the index in the back of the book to find other places the word is used. Look for clues in those pages. It usually helps.

**8.** You can also use the trick of **going back to the beginning of the rele­vant section**. Why? Because authors use the beginning of passages to define basic terms and to explain basic information. They build up their explanations step by step. If you can understand the beginning, it is easier to understand the middle. If the part you are reading depends on understanding something much earlier in the book, turn back to it and read it again. Do this especially if you are picking up the book after a period of time and have forgotten some earlier material. Generally, you can review it a lot faster than you first read it.

**9.** **Break down the puzzling passage into several parts.** You may find that a passage contains several steps or several traits of an object. Isolate them, and if possible, take a pencil and mark 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. in the margin or on a piece of paper.

These parts will be related to other facts and ideas in the sections of the chapter. Pick one part and compare it to another part. Ask yourself how they are related. After you get one relationship answered, work on another. After you figure out the relationship of several parts, the mystery will vanish.

What relationships are there? There are many, but the following ones are common:

•. Cause and effect

•. Whole and its parts

•. Object and its traits

•. Specific example and its general category.

If a passage puzzles you, search for one or more of these relationships.

**10.** **Draw a diagram.** They often make ideas clear. Since you use the visual parts of your brain to make diagrams and look at them, they can increase your com­prehension. To show causes and effects, make little boxes in a row, each containing a word for a cause or effect, and draw arrows from causes to effects. To show parts and wholes, draw a rough sketch of an object and mark the parts.

**11.** **Try to figure out the overall framework.**  This means that you figure out the author's purpose. Perhaps the author is listing four steps, six parts of an explanation, or naming all the effects of an important factor. When you know the frame­work, it helps.

**12.** **Focus on the parts that you do understand.** Then try to see how the part you don't understand can fit in.

**13.** **Make a guess** about the meaning of a puzzling part. Keep the guess in mind and reread the puzzling part as if your guess were true. Does it make sense now? If not, try to make a second guess and reread it. Make a third guess.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU CANNOT FIGURE IT OUT**

**1. Read on.** If you try and cannot make sense of a passage, then read on. Much of the other material will make sense. Meanwhile, you can know that your uncon­scious mind will work on it. Return later to the puzzling part and reread it. I have often found that when I return to a passage later, I understand much more.

**2. Mark puzzling passages.** When you have to leave a passage still a mystery to you, it's possible that you will get it later. So mark it. Put a big question mark in the margin.

If you do not mark it, you may not find it to study again and may not clear up the problem.

**3. Ask someone who might know.** Ask teachers, fellow students, friends.

**4.** If you try several of these techniques and still cannot understand a passage, **possibly it is the writer's fault.** Some writers write poorly. They leave out assumptions and background information that you need. Other writers make mistakes. When writers fail, readers have no chance. When you wonder if a problem is the author's fault, you should mark the passage with a question mark, read on, and later ask your teacher about it.

**5.** If you continue to have a lot of difficulty with a book, it is possible that it is just too hard for you at this time. Think whether there is a course that teaches the prerequisite skills. If so, did you take it? If not, perhaps you should take it. Then later after you build up the skills you need, you will find the same book easier.

**6.** Even if you continue to have difficulty with a book, you can accept the fact that you are truly getting something. In some ways it is better to understand one-half of a good book than to understand nine-tenths of a bad book. Moreover, if you work hard on a difficult book, your work will improve your reading skills. Then you will understand the next difficult book better.