SIX STEPS FOR LEARNING DIFFICULT SUBJECTS QUICKLY

http://www.paulstips.com/brainbox/pt/home.nsf/link/11052006-Six-steps-for-learning-difficult-subjects-quickly

Here's a strategy I've found useful for learning dry and difficult material quickly. At various times, I've used it to build up my knowledge of subjects like economics, investing, writing and computer programming languages. Some people have been surprised at how fast I can learn these kinds of skills, but I think anyone can do it with the right plan. Of course, you can use this to teach yourself interesting things as well, but most people don't have any problem learning stuff that's fun.

Okay, here are the steps...

Step 1: Bombard yourself with information

Many people try to slowly and methodically digest difficult material. They underline things and re-read paragraphs ten times to try and understand. This approach might eventually work, but most people get fed up with it and give up before finishing. Our brains hate this way of learning.

Instead, try to get through the material as quickly as possible. Don't worry if you don't understand everything, just keep reading on. Push yourself to get the damn textbook finished, and don't worry too much about how much you take in.

Skip any exercises or quizzes and just keep ploughing through.

Some people can read an entire textbook in a couple of sittings, but not me. I like to digest 10-20 page chunks, then go and do something else for a while to give my brain a rest. If you do this three or four times a day, you can finish a 600 page textbook in about two weeks.

The only time I stop to go back is if there's some key concept that's being repeated a lot and I don't know what it means. Then, I might allow myself to read a key paragraph or two on that topic, but no more. Otherwise I just challenge myself to get through the book as quickly as possible.

Step 2: Identify the key concepts and make them yours

Once you've finished the text, think about what the key concepts were. Don't concentrate on the details at this stage, just identify the core ten or so ideas that form the basis of the subject. Look them up again and try to define them as simply as you can. Putting them in your own words, with an example, rather than learning by rote is important.

For example, *The Economist* defines the concept of Opportunity Cost as: "The true cost of something is what you give up to get it. This includes not only the money spent in buying (or doing) the something, but also the economic benefits that you did without because you bought (or did) that particular something and thus can no longer buy (or do) something else. "

So you could say to yourself: "Opportunity cost means not being able to spend your resources on one thing because you've already spent them on something else. I can spend my Saturday night doing homework, which means the opportunity cost is that I can't spend that time going to the movies."

Step 3: Memorize only what absolutely has to be memorized

Most facts and figures can be looked up. Don't fill your mind with junk trivia that's only a mouse-click away. Instead of the raw data, concentrate on understanding the ideas of a subject.

However, in any topic, there are some things that simply must be memorized. Cut the list of these down as much as possible, so you're only remembering that which absolutely and definitely has to be remembered.

There are all sorts of memory tricks around, but the one I find most useful is pretty simple. I just repeat out loud the thing that has to be remembered ten times or so. Then, I wait until later in the day and try to remember it again. If I can't, I look it up and repeat it out loud again. Then I wait for later and try to remember it again - and so on. Usually, you can burn a fact into your brain pretty quickly using this method.

Step 4: Get some feedback on your understanding
Now that you've filled your head with stuff, it's time to get some feedback on how well you've understood it. A good way is by doing some kind of mock-exam. You can find these for various subjects on-line, or you might want to try some of the exercises in the textbook.

Again, break this dull task up into chunks if necessary, doing a few different tests over a few days.

You'll probably find that you did pretty badly when you mark yourself. After all, you raced your way through the text. But if you look up the questions that you got wrong, you should amaze yourself at how quickly you start getting a detailed knowledge of the material.

What you're trying to do is build up a framework of the subject in your mind and then fill in the details. This will probably be pretty fuzzy at first, but clarity usually comes quickly as you teach your brain how the concepts are related.

The important thing is not getting the answers right, but looking up what you got wrong and learning it. Do this as quickly as possible. Try to avoid reading whole chapters unless you feel you absolutely need to.

Step 5: Bombard yourself with some more information, but from another source
Now is the time to get some information from other sources. Often, hearing something in a different way helps me to understand it better. It also gives some flexibility to my comprehension.

I'm not suggesting reading another whole textbook. Instead read a few short articles on the subject in magazines and on websites.

Step 6: Get some real-world feedback
Now's the time to get some real-world feedback. If you've learnt a language, try speaking to a native in it. If you've taught yourself anatomy, try having a discussion on the subject with a doctor.

The best real world feedback of all is if you attempt to use your knowledge for fame or fortune (on a small scale of course). Throw yourself in the deep end, in other words. Join a discussion board on the subject and pick an argument with one of the participants. Or try to get paid employment using your new knowledge.

So there they are, my six steps for learning a difficult subject quickly. Of course, the actual amount of time it takes depends on how much work you put in, but this is the most efficient method I've found in terms of understanding achieved compared to time and effort spent. Usually, I can get a good broad understanding of a topic in a month or two using this method.

I hope it works well for you.

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