IMPROVE YOUR COMPREHENSION: FORMULATE QUESTIONS

If you were invited to a party and the hostess forgot to give you the directions, you would probably arrive late or not at all because you did not know where you were going.

This is also true when you are reading textbook material.

Knowing where you are going, in other words, what you will be expected to learn, is the secret to comprehension.

When studying, this can be accomplished efficiently by formulating the topic sentence into a question and then reading to answer the question.

Although when you first begin the method it may seem time consuming, these valuable questions allow you to focus on the material and comprehend the important information with ease.

DEMONSTRATION: TOPIC SENTENCES INTO QUESTIONS

Take this topic sentence:

Meanwhile in the Senate Chamber at Washington, opposition to Wilson's League and Wilson's Fourteen Points increased in volume.

Turn it into a question:

How did the Senate's opposition to Wilson's program increase?

And here is the complete paragraph:

Meanwhile in the Senate Chamber at Washington, opposition to Wilson's League and Wilson's Fourteen Points increased in volume. As early as December 21, 1918, Henry Cabot Lodge, intellectual leader of the Republicans in the Senate, announced that the Senate had equal power with the President in treaty-making and should make its wishes known in advance of the negotiations. He said that there would be quite enough to do at Paris without raising the issue of the League. And he set forth his idea of the sort of peace which ought to be made - an idea radically different from President Wilson's. Lodge and a group of his associates wanted Germany to be disarmed, saddled with a terrific bill for reparations, and, if possible, dismembered. They were ready to give to the Allies large concessions in territory. And above all, they wanted nothing to be included in the peace settlement which would commit the United States to further intervention in European
affairs. They prepared to examine carefully any plan for a League of Nations which might come out of the Conference and to resist it if it involved “entangling alliances.” Thus, to opposition from the diplomats of Europe was added opposition of another sort from the Senate and public opinion at home. Wilson was between two fires. He might not realize how they threatened him, but they were spreading.

As you see, the question is answered. Now another topic sentence:

As compared with the striking increases in July, consumer goods rose relatively little in August.

As a question, it becomes:

Why did consumer goods increase less in August than in July?

And the paragraph answers the question:

As compared with the striking increases in July, consumer goods rose relatively little in August. Unquestionably, the figures on textile and clothing, for example, do not give a correct picture of the increase since monetary reform because the release of hoarded stocks inflated the figures reported for July. The group increase show a 23-per cent rise in July and a 1-percent increase in August. The figures on producer goods and the extractive industries contain less striking examples, but the same phenomenon occurred in these categories to a lesser extent.

In other words, the question of what happened in August is answered by a reevaluation of what happened in July.

Both methods of formulating questions - before thorough reading and during thorough reading - take longer to describe than to use. The time you take to ask yourself a few questions, after pre-reading but before reading thoroughly, will be more than made up by the rapidity with which you will comprehend and the ease with which you will retain the material. Turning first sentences into questions will retard slightly at first your reading speed, but it is an effective method for attacking difficult material and for bringing your concentration back into focus.

Excerpts from Judson: The Techniques of Reading