

Harvard Report

As an experiment, Dr. Perry (psychologist), Director of the Harvard Reading-Study Center, gave 1500 first year students a thirty-page chapter from a history book to read, with the explanation that in about twenty minutes they would be stopped and asked to identify the important details and to write an essay on what they had read.

The class scored well on a multiple-choice test on detail, but only **fifteen students** of 1500 were able to write a short statement on what the chapter was all about in terms of its basic theme. Only fifteen of 1500 top first year college students had thought of reading the paragraph marked "Summary", or of skimming down the descriptive flags in the margin.

This demonstration of "**obedient purposelessness**" is evidence of "an enormous amount of wasted effort" in the study skills of first year students. Some regard it almost as cheating to look ahead or skip around. To most students, the way they study expresses "their relationship to the pressures and conventional rituals of safe passage to the next grade".

Students must be jarred out of this approach. The exercise of judgment in reading requires self-confidence, even courage, on the part of the student who must decide for themselves what to read or skip. Dr. Perry suggested that students ask, "**What is it they want to get out of a reading assignment, and then look around for those points.**" Instructors can help them see the major forms in which expository material is cast. Students should also "talk to themselves" while reading, asking "is this the point I'm looking for?"