Hints on How to Read a Math Text

Many students are tempted to begin work on the assigned problems without first reading the text. Admittedly, math texts aren’t the most scintillating reading. You cannot read a math book as you would a novel or a magazine. But math texts are an excellent source of very important information. They provide definitions of terms, explanations of symbols, discussion of key concepts and carefully worked out examples. Reading your math book may not be easy, but it is essential to your understanding. Do not ignore this important resource! Read your book!

Here’s how:

• First, skim the appropriate pages to mark definitions, new symbols or terms, and key ideas.

• Second, read through the material SLOOOWLY. Mark any points of confusion. Make note cards for new terms, symbols, and key points.

• Third, after the lecture, read through your notes and then read through the section again. Pay particular attention to the material that was not covered in your notes. Make note cards for any new material. Work through the examples and fill in steps which have been omitted. Focus on the reasons why each step was taken.

• Fourth, after you have completely read the material, go back and try to work the examples WITHOUT looking at any of the solutions. When you’re through, check your answer and your steps. Reflect on the steps you took and why they did or did not work. Be sure to compare the different types of examples and the directions for each. If the directions are different, focus on which instructions and steps go with which problem type. Again, be sure to write down any questions that you may have.

• AFTER you have thoroughly read and understood your notes and text, then you are ready to try to work some problems. If you skip this important step, you will decrease your efficiency in working the problems and you will increase the possibility that you will not completely master the material. In the long run, taking time to read the text and study your notes will save you time and frustration.