Welcome to our podcast on active reading. My name is Stephen Foster and I'm the director of academic achievement at Oklahoma City University School of Law.

This podcast will focus on tips and strategies to improve your reading skills to be more fully prepared for class.

You probably heard law school readings are extremely tough. You see stories online of people reading until midnight or rereading the same passage four times and still not understanding the material. You may then be shocked when you read your first law school syllabus because not very many pages are assigned your first few weeks. You may only have 10 to 15 pages per class period. Many students straight from undergrad think that will be easy. They read 30 to 50 pages per class period now, while also completing numerous research papers and maybe even working full time with all of that. Most students probably finished undergrad with a high GPA so 10 to 15 pages seems easy.

Then you start the reading for your first class and read the same page three times and you're now taking two hours for eight pages. You think, maybe that‘s just a fluke until the next class is a similar experience. Now you wonder why it's taking so long and what you could do different.

My goal for this podcast is to help you understand active reading and provide you tips to help you read more efficiently for law school.

Let's begin with why reading for law school is different than undergrad. Undergrad reading is more of a summary from a third-party. It explains information, it goes through and gives you a synopsis of what happened and has a little bit of background in there.

The audience is you, with the goal of understanding what is happening. Law school reading is completely different. The material is actual cases decided by courts, not someone else summarizing them. The intended audience is litigants and practicing attorneys. The courts aren’t trying to teach the law to someone who isn't an attorney yet.

Also, many cases you read are old and might even be from England. They use Latin words you may not know or phrases that aren’t used anymore. The reading is extremely dense so it takes much longer to read a few pages.

The next reason reading for law school is hard is the purpose of the reading. In many undergrad classes you read information and the professor stood at the front of the room explaining most of it. Class interaction didn't tend to delve deeply into the material, at least not in your early undergrad classes.

Law school classes are much different. Professors don't tend to explain the material in the front of the room. They pepper students with questions, some of the questions will be basic recall, but then they will build depth and ask about parties’ arguments. Professors then ask students to apply the information to new situations. Most of the new situations are not in the book. Law school reading provides information to start applying to new situations.

The classes are different and the reading is harder so your strategy to prepare must be more engaged. Passive reading for the gist of the opinion and basic understanding will not get you ready for your professor’s questions. You'll quickly learn precision and knowing exact language matters which requires active reading.

I will provide you a few tips to help you engage in active reading to be much more prepared.

First read the material with a purpose.

When reading for a purpose, notice the headings for the chapter, think about where you are in the class structure and where this material would fit prior to reading the case.

If we're talking about torts and the heading for the chapter is intentional torts and there's a subheading for battery and another heading for intent. Think about how the reading is going to apply within battery, within intentional torts, and within intent. Create a reason or purpose to read the case with questions before starting the reading.

After creating the purpose, continue to think about the case in relation to that purpose.

Some books and professors will ask free reading questions you can use to create your purpose.  Those questions help determine what information should be noted from the opinion.

Second, after we read the material with a purpose, we want to make notes while reading. Reading should be an active process that engages kinesthetic learning. Underline important passages or words or highlight the material. Here's my caveat though, don't highlight everything. When I was a law student, I bought a used book from a friend. I opened the first page and it looked like a rainbow. Every single sentence was highlighted and there were different colors and it was really difficult to figure out what was happening in the book.

That doesn't help us as we're engaging in the activity because it is distracting. Focus on the purpose, not just coloring sentences in the book. I do want you to be active, when you notice a word or sentence that matters underline it and then put it into your notes or put it into your brief.

You want to make sure that you are not just passively skimming the material. You should be processing information constantly. Also, haphazard notes don’t help answer targeted questions. A professor asks about a holding, you need to be able to quickly answer about the holding. Organizing notes with a brief requires constant thought. That helps be active and answer questions.

Third, make sure to create a separate case brief for every major case. I know you're going to hear from all your 2L friends that you don't need to case brief, just make a brief in the book and that will be good enough. Some of them call it margin briefing.

That is not the best way to learn the material. You do need to make notes in your book and you should make what looks like a brief in your book.

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But you need to transcribe that into a notebook or on your computer because a concise brief is what's going to help you answer professors’ questions. Most professors don't like it when you look down and start flipping through pages when they ask you a question. With a brief, you can quickly find the information and answer the professor's questions. Case briefs organize the material to answer questions and help you remember it later. Creating a class outline is also easier from a case brief because you already condensed the information. You can also copy and paste from briefs into your outline.

Lastly, make sure to continually question the reading as you read it.

As you read, ask whether you understand the material and how it fits into the big scheme of battery or intent or intentional torts. Ask whether you answered all the pre-reading questions. If you didn't, then I suggest you go back through the reading looking for those answers.

Make sure to understand as much of the purpose and case brief as possible prior to class to answer your professor's questions. If you have questions the reading doesn’t answer, then you can ask your professor in class to deepen you and your classmates’ understanding.

Another good question is whether this is consistent with the previous case.

Ask how it fits into the material. Does this expand on a topic? Does it add an exception? Does it make the rule broader or does it narrow the rule? You need to consistently ask yourself how the case fits with everything you’ve read.

I know the reading seems easy at first glance of the syllabus, and then seems extremely difficult after you do a couple of readings, but you can get better and better at it, if you engage in active reading techniques. Active reading can help you overcome the old and dense material to better understand what will happen in class. You will be well prepared to answer professors' questions and gain a better understanding during class which helps you prepare for your final exams. Enjoy your law school journey.