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Reading memos

[First section borrowed almost verbatim from Edwin F. Taylor, 'Guest comment: Only the student knows', *American Journal of Physics* 60(3):201–202 (March 1992).]

Students!

Text removed due to copyright restrictions. First section of the article. It motivates students to write reading memos, because after a certain point the author no longer can find the mistakes, difficult areas and potential improvements in the writing.

How reading memos help you

The previous section explained how reading memos help us. Here's how they help you. First, you practice reading a technical textbook. Even after you finish taking courses at MIT or other universities, the world is large and there are many lifetimes of fascinating ideas to learn. If you can learn from books, you have mastered a lifelong skill.

Second, and related to the first point, by reading with attention and with a questioning attitude, you participate in your own learning. That skill too will be useful for your whole life.

Third, reading memos reverse the normal teacher–student hierarchy. For a contrast, think about problem sets. If you cannot solve a problem, you might feel incapable and might become unhappy. I felt that way when I was a student. With a reading memo, when you do not understand where an equation came from, or follow an argument, you have found a problem in the notes. One of my teachers, Donald Knuth, was so interested in knowing about any problems that he would write us checks for \$2.56 for every mistake that we found. I’m not as generous; on the other hand, maybe Knuth was not giving away much – who would cash a check from Knuth? (I still have all of mine.) As it says in the preceding section in Edwin Taylor’s words, with reading memos you are a world-class expert.

Use the reading memos as a way to to practice reading technical material, to formulate questions, and to feel like, no to be an expert.