



By Simone Schenk

Teachers often give assignments in order to stimulate you to digest information in a particular manner. They thereby use terms like ‘understanding’, ‘perception’, ‘critical’, and ‘application’. But these terms are often interpreted differently by the recipients (Schenk, 1986). Understanding what the teacher or tutor wants, also helps you to better understand what you want personally.

To grasp the way you are supposed to digest and elaborate information, first try to find clear definitions of these terms and the appropriate methods of study. Then, you have to check whether your interpretation matches the teacher’s expectation. This Skill Sheet lists a number of the frequently heard interpretations of each of the abovementioned terms. Each interpretation has different consequences for the way you should digest information and prepare for exams.

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**General rule: always ask the teacher for (written) clarification of the learning targets.**

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### **1 Understanding: interpretations**

- You just read the text, without having to stop every time you do not understand a word or a technical term. A more detailed understanding would cost too much mental energy.
- You are able to sense intuitively the meaning of a text, without being able to explain it in detail. By using examples you can understand what is meant, but be careful: a cow is an animal, but an animal need not be a cow (→C6).
- You can follow what the author of a text means, without being able to apply this approach to a new topic.

### **2 Perception: interpretations**

- You can identify the message per paragraph. Your perception of the main lines helps you to grasp the structure of the whole text. The more ‘previous knowledge’ you have, the less energy goes into studying.
- You can (re)construct the implicit premises of the author(s), for example, the political preference, or the vision regarding companies and organisations. This kind of perception can be created by using existing political/social/psychological frameworks of reference to ask questions about the material presented.
- You are capable of formulating comparable argumentation and/or you are able to identify fallacies in the author’s argumentation (⊕C8). Such perception can only be achieved if you have studied the argumentation in some detail. Otherwise, you run the risk of criticising mainly partial elements of the argumentation with too much of your own interpretation.



### 3 Critical: interpretations

- A teacher may expect you to compare for instance three different approaches dealing with a particular topic. You are supposed to critically assess points where the authors agree and disagree.
- You are supposed to come up with a balanced judgement. You can not copy someone else's statements. You are expected to assess the 'pros' and 'cons' as a relative outsider, master the topic and only then formulate a critical judgement of the approaches.
- You should make explicit the implicit criticism of one author of another author. You must check whether criticism is mainly focused on partial elements, and whether conclusions have been drawn too quickly or are one-dimensional. You have to consider what kind of 'understanding' and 'perception' is at the basis of the observed criticism.

### 4 Application: interpretations

- As with a cookery book, you follow the recipes step-by-step. Each example is then compared with the related theory/model.
- You use a theory or a model to generate questions about reality. Theories and models in social sciences can not be identified as 'true' or 'false', but as more or less applicable to a particular problem (→A7).
- You investigate under what practical circumstances you can identify a theory or model, by making their premises explicit. You can look at the background of the author in terms of personal background (political, country, class, company, year) or scientific 'school'.

During your education, you are constantly moving in a continuum, from 'what does the other person think' to 'what do I think'. Monitor your own activities constantly. Do you too often critically assess parts of a text that you are reading? If so you may run the risk of not grasping the structure of the argumentation and coming to misleading conclusions. If you do not look at the background information about the author, you run the risk of not actively digesting the text (→C2). If you prepare for an exam it is relevant to know whether the teacher is aiming at (and testing on) understanding, critical perceptions and/or applications. Old exam questions can come in handy, certainly if the teacher is prepared to explain the intentions behind the past questions.

### 5 Exercise

Use Table B.3 as an aid to assessing the intentions of the teacher. The first column contains a number of possible assignments given by the teacher. The second column refers to possible interpretations of 'understanding', 'perception', 'critical', and 'application'. These interpretations can then be used to decide which kind of study method should be used to comply with the intention of the assignment/teacher. When filling in the third column you confront two aspects of intentions for studying: what you want to do, and what the teacher wants you to do. You will see immediately where discrepancies lie between your preferred style of studying and the teacher's demands. Talk about this problem with your teacher. Many teachers are often open to changes, once they are confronted by serious and dedicated participants (→The Challenge, part I).

**Table B.3 What does the teacher want and what do I want?**

<b>What does the teacher want?</b>	<b>Possible interpretations</b>	<b>What do I want/what should I do?</b>
Multiple-choice exam with knowledge questions	Memorise facts, depart from understanding and perception	
Multiple-choice exam with case questions	Compare and apply theories/-models	
Open exam questions, knowledge	Memorise and repeat facts by using understanding/perception	
Open exam questions, understanding and application	It is essential to argue answers on the basis of facts	
Essay, theoretical topic	Analyse on the basis of understanding/perception	
Essay, practical topic	Theoretical underpinning	
Expects understanding	Text parts, (between) paragraphs	
Expects perception	Texts, between texts or own text construction	
Expects criticism	Approach of renowned theorists or your own input	
Expects applications	From understanding, perception or criticism	