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LDS “How To” Series: How to read around cases in clerkship

What is reading around cases?

In medical school, and especially once you enter clerkship, you will see patients who are diagnosed with a multitude of diseases. In pre-clerkship, you would have learned about these presentations and will likely understand the theory behind many of the cases. However, seeing the cases during clerkship will demonstrate the nuance that is involved in both presentation and diagnosis. To truly understand a disease and be able to relate it to these varied presentations, it is important to read around your cases.

In many instances, this involves going home after your shift and reading about the diseases that you encountered that day¹. This includes identifying points of interest, disease processes, or areas of confusion that you have from your shift and reading about them. In doing so, you can help yourself relate the theory that you learned in pre-clerkship to the patients that you see in the hospital or clinic.

Why should I read around my cases?

Learning is an ongoing process that takes time and repetition³. Reading around your cases provides you with an opportunity to connect what you have learned in a textbook to the real presentations of patients. Seeing patients with a certain disease can help you visualize what you are learning. This is called “**dual coding**”^{2,3}. Dual coding is using “multiple sensory inputs”³ to learn information; for example, combining both visual and verbal forms of information can enhance recall^{2,3}. By reading around your cases, you are reminding yourself of the important disease processes that are happening behind the presentation.

Case presentations are rarely as straightforward as they are in textbooks. Patients can present with a variety of different symptoms, and it will be up to you to delineate how those symptoms relate to disease processes. Reading around your cases can help clarify your understanding of pathophysiology, and help you make connections between this and atypical presentations. It also helps you connect concrete examples to the theory that you have learned³. The more of these examples you can create for yourself, the better your recall will be.

When should I read around my cases?

Reading around your cases can look different from rotation to rotation. In some instances, you may find yourself looking information up after you have seen an interesting case¹. During other rotations it may make sense to read about cases before seeing them. For example, in surgical specialties, you can

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look up the list for surgery the day before, and make sure you have read about the patient and the procedure that they are undergoing.

If you are reading after you have left the hospital or clinic, pick one or two interesting presentations that you would like to learn more about¹. Remind yourself about the pathophysiology of the disease and look up any other points of interest that arose during your interaction. Doing this the same day that you see the patient (while you still remember the details of the encounter) can enhance your memory of the facts.

Reading around your cases can happen anywhere. If you have some downtime on call, or when you're on the ward, that is an excellent time to read⁴. Utilizing your spare time when you are at work means that you can spend some time focusing on yourself when you leave. Use reputable websites to look up disease presentations or carry a pocket textbook/guide in your scrubs⁴.

If you are having trouble motivating yourself to read around cases after work, consider allowing yourself to have a break immediately after you leave. Intense focus takes a lot of mental effort⁵, and you may find that you are able to focus more on reading after a break. You can also try to incorporate your reading into tasks that you already need to do. For example, if you need to look something up around a specific patient that you are following, consider adding some extra reading at that time. Medical podcasts can also be a great way to learn information, especially if you have a long drive home.

A gentle reminder...

Medical school is tough, and clerkship is demanding. Reading around your cases is important, but so is making time for yourself. Remember that your brain requires food and rest to function optimally. When you are scheduling time to read around cases, remember that it is also important that you set aside time to do things you love, see people you care about, and take naps post-call. Medicine is a marathon, and pacing yourself is key.

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2. *Dual Coding Theory (Allan Paivio)*. InstructionalDesign.org. (N.D.). Accessed 21/10/2023. <https://www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/dual-coding/>
3. Pumilia, C., Lessans, S., Harris, D. *An Evidence-Based Guide for Medical Students: How to Optimize the Use of Expanded-Retrieval Platforms*. *Cureus*. 2020 Sep; 12(9): e10372. Published online 2020 Sep 11. Accessed 20/10/2023. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7550004/>
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5. Oakley, B. *A Mind for Numbers: How to Excel at Math and Science (Even if You Flunked Algebra)*. 2014. Tarcher Perigee. Print. pp 44-45.