Nine things you can do when you're confused while reading.

Not understanding something is frustrating but try not to let it upset you; as you now know, confusion is a natural part of the learning process. Remember also that not everything in every course is relevant to your purposes, and even if you wanted to understand everything in every course, there's simply not enough time.

Having said that, there are steps you can take that will clear away some roadblocks to your understanding. Since your confusion can have a number of causes, you may have to try more than one of the following suggestions:

1. **Look it up.** Confusion occurs when you don't understand what a word means or the terminology is misleading. Look up the definition, making sure to note its pronunciation so you can “pronounce” it in your head as you read. More advanced concepts involve more than knowing the definition. Understanding 'photosynthesis' means more than simply looking up its definition. However, a definition may have to do while you wait for other pieces of the puzzle to fall in place.

2. **Return to your road map -- the big picture.** Sometimes details can make you lose sight of the main ideas.

3. **Jump immediately to the end.** If you don’t see where the author’s discussion is heading, you may have lost the big picture, but sometimes simply seeing the conclusion or summary is all you need.

4. **Find another source of information.** A textbook or instructor provides only one point of view. Sometimes all you need is a different perspective. Search the internet or library for supplementary sources of information.

5. **Find an example.** If a topic becomes too abstract, examples are almost always more enlightening than explanations. If one example doesn’t help, find another.

6. **Retrace your steps.** Instructors and authors sometimes skip steps in their presentations or omit “obvious” points. If you don’t see the connection between something that is said and what follows, go back to the last point you did understand and trace where you lost the thread.

7. **Sleep on it.** Your brain processes information when you’re asleep. Take the problem material to bed with you and review it one last time before turning out the lights. You have now “planted” the problem in your brain. When you wake up the next morning, don’t get out of bed immediately: you want to remain in that dreamlike mental state as long as possible before fully waking up. Without “trying too hard,” casually look over the material again. You’ll often find that your confusion has mysteriously cleared up overnight without your doing anything! Be sure you immediately write down your early-morning insight or it will vanish as quickly and as surely as your memory of last night’s dream.

8. **Teach someone.** A great way to clarify something that confuses you is by explaining it to someone else. Preferably someone who knows less about the topic than you do. To be clear you’ll be forced to stick to the essential points, and the questions your “student” asks will stimulate your own thinking. You’ll frequently find that midway through your explanation you’ve cleared up your own confusion.

9. **Ask for help.** I put this last for a reason: you’ll learn more if you first try working things out on your own. If you’re completely stymied, ask someone (a classmate or instructor) for a hint or an example rather than a complete explanation. This will give you a chance to work out the rest for yourself. (Better yet, explain your difficulty to the person, as in the previous suggestion. Trying to articulate your confusion often clears it up!)

If none of these tips does the trick, don’t spend any more time - you don’t have all the pieces of the puzzle. Skip what you’re stuck on and see if you can make sense of the rest of the section before returning to what’s stumping you. If that fails, switch to a completely different subject and return to what’s confusing you in the next day or two (Do put off till tomorrow what you can’t possibly do today.) Be patient. As you continually revise and update your summary study notes, the “missing information” will emerge.