



COLLEGE FOOTBALL OFFICIATING, LLC

ON STUDYING THE RULES

Quite often officials will ask me for advice on studying the rules. Many times I hear officials say, “I study that rule a lot, but I still have a very hard time with it.” When someone tells me that they “study” the rules, often what they really mean is they “read” the rules. “Reading” is an important part of “studying,” of course, but it is not the only thing. Reading and studying are different. They are related, to be sure, but they are definitely not identical.

What’s missing from this picture is *writing*. In my opinion, writing is an extremely important part of studying that most folks overlook, partly because they find writing to be hard work. And it is. But the payoff is powerful. A very smart friend of mine frames it this way, “If you *read* an idea, you rent it. But if you *write* the idea you own it.” This principle can be applied to studying the rules.

Here are some steps that I encourage you to try. When you have settled on a particular rule or portion of the rule book to study, do these:

1. Read the rule.
2. Write it out in your own words. Don’t use “rule-speak,” the jargon of the rule book. Instead, write out the rule by using words with which you are comfortable.
3. Explain or describe the rule (without looking at the book!) to someone else—a fellow official, your wife, a coach, and especially to someone who would not be expected to know it. If you can’t explain a rule to someone else, then you don’t really understand it yourself.
4. Make up two or three play situations that illustrate the rule. Try to use plays that you have personally seen, ones that have some chance of actually happening, rather than off-the-wall stuff that you are extremely unlikely of ever seeing. Lots of folks love to play “rule book trivia” by concocting outlandish plays, but I don’t find this especially helpful.

Scotty Reston, a former editor of the *New York Times*, once was asked what he thought about a certain issue in foreign policy. And his answer was, “How can I know what I think about it until I read what I have written about it?” This applies very well to understanding the rules of football: until you read what you have written about a rule, you are very unlikely to have a clear understanding of it.