

Active Reading

This leaflet will:

- Describe some of the key reading skills to develop for academic study
- Help you reflect on your existing skills
- Suggest some 'active reading' techniques for dealing with academic texts

Whatever age or stage you have reached by the time you start formal study, you will have developed a range of sophisticated reading skills already.

Spend a few minutes reflecting on the variety of texts you deal with in an average day – posters, labels, newspapers, magazines, formal and informal letters, gas bills, teletext – and think about the different ways you tackle them. You probably skim and scan and question until you find the information you need, or have a good idea what it is about, then move on. You are already an **active reader**.

The kind of process you go through with everyday texts is basically the same as that you would use to deal with reading for academic purposes. The main difference, initially, is that you need to:

- Realise you possess many of the skills you need already
- Apply and develop your skills more consciously when you start academic study, remembering that academic reading becomes easier with practice.

Tip:

At an early stage in your course, spend some time browsing through your subject section in the library. Browse quickly over the books available, read the backs, and generally develop a sense of the topics, any specialised vocabulary, and key authors. This familiarity will help when you are looking for useful resources for an assignment later.

**If you would like this leaflet in an alternative format, contact:
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Reading at university

Reading at school or college can mean directed reading. The tutor may set you a chapter, or an article, or sometimes a whole book, so that you are clear about what you have to read. At university, you may sometimes be given a reading pack, or an article, or a set of readings to prepare for a seminar, but generally you are expected to 'read around' a subject for yourself.

Your main guide as to what to read is the reading list that will go with a module.

Reading lists will vary from module to module, and between subjects. They **may** contain:

Essential reading – set chapters or pages and titles may be named

Directed reading – set pages in journals and books that you have to read in preparation for a seminar or lecture

Optional reading – like a secondary list which may extend your understanding of the subject

Further reading – material you may not have time to use, or that is relevant to your immediate needs e.g. writing an essay. You may choose to note texts to go back to later.

On the other hand, a reading list may be extensive, but without any particular guide as to what is important. It is then up to you to decide what and how to read – but **YOU ARE NOT EXPECTED TO READ EVERYTHING.**

Selecting Texts – deciding what to read

What do you want from your reading?

General background to a topic? An overview?

To follow up a point in a lecture?

Evidence for a particular point of view?

Main ideas or theories of your subject?

The answer will vary, depending on what you decide you are reading **for**.

The most important reading skills at university are those which help you quickly get an idea of what something is about, such as skimming and scanning. You can then decide what is worth reading in more detail.

Think about what type of reading you want to do, then...

Examine source for suitability

Is the text up to date? Recent?

Does it look readable? Manageable?

Does it contain the right information?

Check title, author, contents list, 'blurb' on the back, sub-headings, index for keywords, conclusions

When you have located a useful section, use skimming and scanning:

Skimming

Run your eyes rapidly over the page, letting words and phrases 'jump out' at you, just as you would read through a newspaper to get the jist of a story.

After initial skimming, you may want to read a paragraph in more detail to follow up the initial points that you have spotted.

Skimming is a vital skill in helping you initially narrow down your reading to useful and relevant texts. You need a general sense of what you are looking for, but skimming works best if you let yourself relax a bit ...things 'jump out' more if do...and practise really helps.

Scanning

This is used to find a particular piece of information e.g. you may be looking for a specific reference to 'qualitative evidence', so you will run your eyes over a page looking for this term, skimming with a focus.

Detailed and critical reading

Once you have selected a really useful section, chapter or paragraph, you may decide to read in more depth, and more critically.

This may involve you in:

- Working out the point of view of the writer
- Understanding the principles of a theory
- Locating useful information for an essay, report or presentation
- Evaluating the material – do you agree with it? How does it add to what you know already? How could you use it? Does it support/contradict other material?

Knowing Your Learning Style

When you read, it's important to get the 'bigger picture' of how you are equipped to tackle the task. If you don't, you can set yourself unrealistically demanding reading tasks and then feel discouraged if you can't complete them. Pressure can sometimes be useful, but set yourself realistic targets!

Bear in mind:

- How much time you have

- How long you can read with concentration
- Times you need a break – and take them!
- Your levels of tiredness, distraction...which will vary
- Noise, other distractions, conditions you need to concentrate
- (you may 'skim and scan' effectively with background noise, or on the bus...but more detailed reading may require more peace

Make Reading Interactive

Once you have embarked on a detailed reading of a text:
 Break it down into manageable 'chunks' to suit your concentration level
 Keep asking your self questions to engage yourself actively with the text.
 It's a good idea to write these down and have them next to you:

- What is the main argument?
- What evidence supports it?
- Do I agree with the point of view?
- Is this information relevant/useful to my essay? Where does it fit in?
- What conflicting/similar views are there here?
- What are the key points of this chapter?
- Can I sum up what I've read in a few sentences/my own words?
- Is this as useful as I thought it was? Shall I try something else now?

Take Notes

- Taking notes helps focus your reading (see relevant leaflet)
- Always note details of the book for referencing (author, date, title, publisher)
- If you photocopy , use highlighters to emphasise key points.
- Try using a quick mindmap to show main ideas and links
- Note any questions, queries, 'jargon' you need to decode
- Mark pages of books with post-it notes, bookmarks, bus tickets...

More Tips for Building Academic Reading Confidence

Academic writing can be difficult. If you find it hard to engage with a text, try discussing it with other students. Talking about what you are reading with others is an important and really helpful way of getting to grips with an idea or argument. Try going back to basic questions about a text if you find it hard.

- Why am I reading this? How useful is it?
- What is it that I find difficult about this?

- What is the main point of this page/chapter/paragraph?
- Is there a more straightforward text I can look at?
- When or how would I use this information?
- Why is he/she saying that? Is there evidence?
- Do I agree? Disagree? Why?

You might like to try the following method, which brings together the active reading approaches outlined above:

SQ3R : Five steps to effective reading

Step 1: Skim and scan

Scan a piece of text (paragraph or longer) – look at it quickly; notice headings, pictures, images, key words – try to get an overall impression.

If you are reading more than one page, flick forwards and backwards.

If there are no pictures and headings, just glance at the first sentence of each paragraph.

Step 2: Question

Make up some questions: Who? What? Where? When? How? Why?

Read any questions provided.

Step 3: Read

Read the text carefully. Try to read in a relaxed, focused, and fairly speedy way.

Don't agonise over difficult words or ideas.

Do not make notes yet.

Step 4: Remember

Test your memory – but don't worry if you can't remember much.

Jot down some points without looking at the text.

Step 5: Review

Read the passage again, taking brief notes, paragraph by paragraph

Use your own words as much as possible – look away from the text, and imagine you are trying to explain it to someone else.