

Peer Learning Reading and Notetaking: Effective reading handout

EFFECTIVE READING

Reading is one of the essential activities of studying. During your course you will have to :

- ❖ do a lot of reading.
- ❖ read difficult material.
- ❖ try to remember what you have read.

This study guide will suggest ways for you to improve your reading skills and to read in a more focused and selective manner. To improve your reading skills you need to:

- ❖ have clear reading goals.
- ❖ choose the right texts.
- ❖ use active reading techniques
- ❖ use the appropriate reading method.

1 Reading goals

Before starting to read you need to **consider why** you are reading and what you are trying to learn and to vary the way you read accordingly.

- If you are reading for general interest and to acquire background information for lectures you may want to read the topic widely but with not much depth.
- If you are reading for an essay you will need to focus the reading around the essay question and may need to study a small area of the subject in great depth. Jot down the essay question and don't get side-tracked and waste time on non-relevant issues.

2 Selecting reading materials

It is unlikely that you will be able - or be expected - to read all the books and articles on your reading-list. You will be limited by time and by the availability of the material.

a) To decide whether a book is relevant and useful:

- 📖 Look at the author's name, the title and the date of publication. Is it essential reading? Is it out of date?
- 📖 Read the publisher's blurb on the cover or look through the editor's introduction to see whether it is relevant.
- 📖 Look at the contents page. Does it cover what you want? Is it at the right level? Are there too few pages on the topic - or too many?
- 📖 Look through the introduction to get an idea of the author's approach.
- 📖 Look up an item in the index (preferably something you know a bit about) and read through one or two paragraphs to see how the author deals with the material.
- 📖 Look through the bibliography to see the range of the author's sources.

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- 📖 Are the examples, illustrations, diagrams etc. easy to follow and helpful for your purpose?

b) To select useful articles from journals or research papers:

- 📖 Read the summary or abstract. Is it relevant?
- 📖 Look at the Conclusions and skim-read the Discussion, looking at headings. Is it worth reading carefully because it is relevant or interesting?
- 📖 Look through the Introduction. Does it summarise the field in a helpful way? Does it provide a useful literature review?
- 📖 Unless you have loads of time, only read the whole article if one or more of the following is satisfied:
 - It is a seminal piece of work – essential reading.
 - It is highly relevant to your essay, etc.
 - It is likely that you can get ideas from it.
 - There is nothing else available and you are going to have to make the most of this.
 - It is so exciting that you can't put it down!

c) Where to start if there is no reading list

- 📖 Use the library website www.rdg.ac.uk/libweb/ and look up **subject guides** and **resources**
- 📖 Find a general textbook on the subject.
- 📖 Use encyclopaedias and subject based dictionaries.
- 📖 Do a web search BUT stay focused on your topic AND think about the reliability of the web sites.
- 📖 Browse the relevant shelves in the library and look for related topics.
- 📖 Ask your tutor for a suggestion for where to start.

3 Active reading

Keep focused on your reading goal. One way to do this is to ask questions as you read and try to read actively and creatively. It is a good idea to think of your own subject related questions but the following may be generally useful:

a) Collecting information

- ? What do I want to know about?
- ? What is the main idea behind the writing?

Adapted from: Brief student-facing guide to academic reading - originally produced by Angela Taylor & Judy Turner from the University of Reading. <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/research-skills/reading/academic-reading-handbook-for-students/>

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- ? What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence?
- ? In research, what are the major findings?

b) Questioning the writing

- ? What are the limitations or flaws in the evidence?
- ? Can the theory be disproved or is it too general?
- ? What examples would prove the opposite theory?
- ? What would you expect to come next?
- ? What would you like to ask the author?

c) Forming your own opinion

- ? How does this fit in with my own theory/beliefs?
- ? How does it fit with the opposite theory/beliefs?
- ? Is my own theory/beliefs still valid?
- ? Am I surprised?
- ? Do I agree?

4 Different reading techniques

Your reading speed is generally limited by your thinking speed. **If ideas or information requires lots of understanding then it is necessary to read slowly.** Choosing a reading technique must depend upon **why** you are reading:

- ❖ To enjoy the language or the narrative.
- ❖ As a source of information and/or ideas.
- ❖ To discover the scope of a subject - before a lecture, seminar or research project.
- ❖ To compare theories or approaches by different authors or researchers.
- ❖ For a particular piece of work e.g. essay, dissertation....

It is important to keep your aims in mind. Most reading will require a mixture of techniques e.g scanning to find the critical passages followed by reflective reading.

A) Scanning

To search for particular information or to see if a passage is relevant :

- Look up a word or subject in the index or look for the chapter most likely to contain the required information.
- Use a pencil and run it down the page to keep your eyes focusing on the search for key words

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B) Skim reading

To quickly gain an overview, familiarise yourself with a chapter or an article or to understand the structure for later note-taking.

- Don't read every word.
- Do read summaries, heading and subheadings.
- Look at tables, diagrams, illustrations, etc.
- Read first sentences of paragraphs to see what they are about.

If the material is useful or interesting, decide whether just some sections are relevant or whether you need to read it all.

C) Reflective or critical reading

Reading it all carefully using active reading techniques

- Think about the questions you want to answer.
- Read actively in the search for answers.
- Look for an indication of the chapter's structure or any other "map" provided by the author.
- Follow through an argument by looking for:
 - A) Its structure:**
 - main point
 - subpoints
 - reasons, qualifications, evidence, examples...
 - B) "Signposts"** –sentences or phrases to indicate the structure e.g. "There are three main reasons, Firstly.. Secondly.. Thirdly.." or to emphasise the main ideas e.g. "Most importantly.." "To summarise.."
 - C) Connecting words** which may indicate separate steps in the argument e.g. "but", "on the other hand", "furthermore", "however"..
- After you have read a chunk, make **brief** notes remembering to record the **page number** as well as the complete reference (Author, title, date, journal/publisher, etc)
- At the end of the chapter or article put the book aside and go over your notes, to ensure that they adequately reflect the main points.
 - ❖ How has this added to your knowledge?
 - ❖ Will it help you to make out an argument for your essay?

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- ❖ Do you agree with the arguments, research methods, evidence..?
- ❖ Add any of your own ideas – indicating that they are YOUR ideas use [] or different colours.

D) Rapid reading

N.B. It is more important to understand what you read than to read quickly. Reading at speed is fine for scanning and skim-reading, but is unlikely to work for reflective, critical reading.

If you are concerned that you are really slow:

- ☺ Check that you are not mouthing the words – it will slow you down
- ☺ Do not stare at individual words – let your eyes run along a line stopping at every third word. Practise and then lengthen the run until you are stopping only four times per line, then three times, etc.
- ☺ The more you read, the faster you will become as you grow more familiar with specialist vocabulary, academic language and reading about theories and ideas. So keep practising...
- ☺ Make an individual appointment to see a University Study Adviser.

5 Common abbreviations used in footnotes and text references

ibid : In the same work as the last footnote or reference (from *ibidem* meaning: in the same place)

op.cit: In the work already mentioned (from *operato citato* meaning in the work cited)

ff: and the following pages

pp: pages

cf: compare

passim: to be found throughout a particular book.

6 Useful Websites

Study advice www.reading.ac.uk/studyskills

Library www.reading.ac.uk/libweb

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University Study Advisers
University of Reading
www.learnhigher.ac.uk

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