

Critical and reflective reading

Thinking critically about what you read is not a mysterious skill only available to the best students; it just means asking yourself whether you are convinced by what you are reading – then asking yourself WHY you are convinced, or not. Consider the following:

- What is the main line of reasoning?
- Is there a hidden agenda?
- What evidence is being used?
- Are there any limitations in the evidence or research methods?
- What are the conclusions?
- Does it fit in with other academic research / thought?
- Does it alter / strengthen your own view – and why?

Staying focused

Read actively by asking yourself what you think about the information you are reading. This will keep you actively engaging with what you are reading, rather than just passively absorbing it. Consider:

- What do I want to know about? (your reading goals?)
- What is the main idea – or what are the major findings?
- How does this fit in with my own ideas, theory, experience?
- Am I surprised – or do I agree and what is making me agree?

For more information....

See **Researching your assignment 2. Making useful notes.**

See **Researching your assignment 3. Using & evaluating websites.**

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Effective academic reading



Researching your assignment 1

This guide covers approaches to academic reading for your research. It includes:

- Identifying your goals
- Selecting what to read
- Reading more efficiently
- Critical and reflective reading
- Staying focused

Before you start – identify your goals

Identifying what you want to find out from your reading before you start will help you to focus and make your reading more active.

Decide what you need to read up on and perhaps write a few questions to seek answers to whilst reading. Depending on what stage you are at, you may be reading to find out:

- Wide background information or context
- Previous or most recent research on a defined area
- Theories or methods to underpin your work
- Evidence to support your ideas

Top tip: Start by reading a basic introduction, encyclopaedia article, or general textbook first. This will give you an overview and broad framework on which to hang more complex information, making it easier to process and stay focused.

Selecting what to read

You're not expected to read everything on the reading list – but choose the texts you do read carefully. You will need to consider:

- The amount of time available
- What resources are available
- Any guidance given (reading list, references from lectures or Blackboard)

Check for relevance & usefulness by asking these questions:

- Look at the summary, abstract, introduction or contents page. Does it cover your goals?
- Is it sufficiently up-to-date?
- Look up an item from the index and / or read through a couple of paragraphs – is it at the right level?
- Are the examples, illustrations, diagrams etc. easy to follow and helpful for your purpose?
- Check the references – what is the range of the author's sources?

“There isn't a reading list / all the books are out.”

With everyone on one course chasing the same texts, it's no wonder they seem to be out all the time. But there are other places to look.

- Start by checking if your department has its own library.
- Use the library catalogue - www.reading.ac.uk/library/ - and look up keywords related to your topic. Or, if a book is on loan, use the “nearby items on shelf” button on the library catalogue or browse the shelves for related topics.
- Bound copies of journals are only loaned for one day, so you're more likely to find something on the shelves. Books in the Course Collection are loaned for even less time - 6 hours or overnight – so identify the pages you need and photocopy them.
- Look at the “finding information in your subject” guides on the library website. Use e-journals and the library's e-journal finder.
- As a last resort, ask your lecturer for guidance.

“Should I use the Internet?” The Internet has a lot of useful information but you must consider if the website is appropriate for academic work, just like you would with books and journals. You wouldn't use information from *Heat* magazine as authoritative evidence in an academic assignment, for instance – so remember to use the same standards with webpages! For more on this, see *Researching your assignment 3: Using & evaluating websites*.

Reading more efficiently

The texts you are expected to read at university are complex and contain challenging ideas, so it is likely reading will take you longer than when you read for pleasure. Your reading speed will increase with practice, and as you become more familiar with the subject. Try these tips:

- Identify your goals and read actively – see front page for more tips.
- Skim read through quickly without taking notes to get a basic understanding, then read through again to deepen understanding.
- Use a ruler or pencil to keep your eyes moving at a good pace down the page. Move it slightly faster than your normal reading speed.
- Don't keep re-reading a passage if you don't understand it – move on and keep reading, then come back to it if necessary. If you're still struggling, read something more basic first.
- Read the first and last lines of each paragraph to get a basic framework of the text (these often signpost the main points).
- Read a chunk of text (a paragraph, or a page) before taking notes.
- Set your own limits, for example choose three texts to start your reading, then decide if there is anything else you need to find out.
- Take regular breaks to give your brain a chance to process what you've read.

Top tip: If you feel you never have enough time to write your assignment because you have to do so much reading, aim to write a draft before you think you have finished reading. Then you can identify if there are any gaps that you need to fill with more research, and focus any further reading to fill these gaps.