

Reading Effectively



The Learning Centre • <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au>

When you are new to university study, the amount of reading you are expected to do can be intimidating. However, you can learn how to prepare yourself in advance and find ways to make the going easier. What appears to be an impossible task becomes possible when you start becoming an active reader; that is, asking questions about what you need to find out, taking a strategic and critical approach, and then select readings that relate to your questions and tasks.

Reading FAQ

Does uni study involve lots of reading?

In a word - yes. Most courses involve a great deal of reading, which is why you need to learn new skills to manage the workload.

What will I be expected to read for?

- **Lectures:** You will be expected to do some pre-reading before lectures.
- **Tutorials:** Tutorials are often based on a set of readings. If you have not read the material, you won't be able to participate in group discussion.
- **Assignments:** You can't write your assignment until you have done the necessary research.

The aim of most of your reading will be to seek information related to an assignment or course material.

I read novels and newspapers - will reading uni material be the same?

How we read usually depends on our **purpose** for reading. For example, while you might start reading a novel on page one and read every word until you reach the end, this wouldn't be an effective approach to take with academic reading. To get the most out of academic reading and to use your time effectively, you need to take a strategic approach.

I have a reading list - am I expected to read everything on it?

Lengthy reading lists for courses and essays can be confusing, particularly when the topics are unfamiliar. However you don't have to feel lost. Although only rarely will you be expected to read absolutely everything, if the thought of all that reading is daunting, don't hesitate to take a strategic approach and be **selective**.

Tips for Active Reading

Reading at university = reading with a purpose

Successful study at uni is often about meeting competing demands and deadlines, so you need to get the most out of your reading in the limited time available. Before you begin, make sure you have identified a) the purpose for doing the reading and b) what you need to achieve.

Always read with a purpose in mind. You should have an idea of why you are reading and what you are looking for/ what you want to achieve before you begin reading. Are you reading:

- to locate specific information?
- to understand difficult ideas?
- to gain an overview of something?
- to enjoy words and descriptions (as in poetry and some prose)?
- to relax and escape into a novel?

Think about the way you would read to get a broad idea of what an article might be about, compared to how you would read to understand a complex and detailed concept - you might use **previewing** for the first task and **intensive** or **critical** reading for the second (more about this in the Reading Strategies section). Working out **why** you are reading something (what you need to achieve) will determine the **way you** will read it (or which reading strategies to use).

Be selective about what you read

Uni study requires a lot of reading, but as time is usually limited, it is important to be selective about what you read. You need to make decisions about what is essential.

- Establish which readings are required for your particular course and which are suggested (not compulsory). In some courses required readings take the form of a Course 'Reader' or textbook, in others your lecturer/ tutor will indicate what is essential.
- There will be times when you need to read an entire article or chapter in detail. At other times you may be looking for specific information relating to an assignment topic and only a couple of pages or even a couple of paragraphs will be useful. Once you locate the parts of a text that are going to be most relevant you may not need to read the rest.

How to select?

- Know what you are looking for (i.e. have a purpose).
- Identify key words to help you search. Look for them when browsing the table of contents and index of a book for relevant pages.
- Obtain an overview to further narrow down the 'possibly useful' field.

First, establish what you already know

Any prior knowledge of the topic you are reading about will help you read more effectively. Before you begin:

- Ask yourself what you already know or think about the topic (from lectures, from other reading, from what you have heard or seen.)
- Identify your expectations - what do you think the reading will be about?
- Read any related questions - they may be questions at the back of the chapter or the essay/assignment question.
- Ask yourself questions about the topic; what do you want to find out?
- If you have a reading list, select a source that might offer a good starting point. If the topic or material is new, begin with an introductory text and read slowly.

You will remember more if you read with questions in mind, rather than adopting the 'sponge' approach - simply trying to absorb everything.

Focus on the question/ task

- If you are reading for a specific assignment, read with a copy of the question/ task on hand so you don't waste time reading irrelevant material.

Reading Strategies

Active readers use reading strategies to help save time and cover a lot of ground. Your purpose for reading should determine which strategy or strategies to use.

1. Previewing the text to get an overview

What is it? Previewing a text gives you an idea of what it is about without actually reading the main body of the text.

When to use it: to help you decide whether a book or journal is useful for your purpose; to get a general sense of the article structure; to help you locate relevant information; to help you to identify the sections of the text you may need to read and the sections you can omit.

To preview, start by reading:

- the title and author details.
- the abstract (if there is one)
- then read only the parts that 'jump out': main and subheadings, chapter summaries, any highlighted text
- examine any illustrations, graphs, tables or diagrams and their captions, as these usually summarise the content of large slabs of text
- the first sentence in each paragraph

2. Skimming

What is it? Skimming involves running your eye very quickly over large chunks of text. It is different from previewing because skimming involves the paragraph text. Skimming allows you to pick up some of the main ideas without paying attention to detail. It is a fast process. A single chapter should take only a few minutes.

- Ask yourself what it is you must find out. Identify questions you want to answer; actively look for those answers and evidence to inform them.
- Identify a few topic key words to search for.

Break reading into manageable segments

If you are finding reading overwhelming, break your reading up into manageable segments (e.g. chapters, individual articles, a specific number of pages).

- Identify your purpose and the time you have available.
- Set yourself a goal (for example, decide to read for a set length of time or a certain number of pages).
- Reward yourself with a break when you've completed it.
- The tasks and goals may be large or small, depending on what needs to be achieved.

Keep track of what you read

Always note where information and ideas come from. Record details of author, title, place of publication, publisher and date now so that you don't have the frustration of trying to find the book again. Always record page numbers with any notes you take.

Use reading strategies

When to use it: to quickly locate relevant sections from a large quantity of written material. Especially useful when there are few headings or graphic elements to help you gain an overview of a text. Skimming adds further information to an overview.

How to skim:

- Note any bold print and graphics.
- Start at the beginning of the reading and glide your eyes over the text very quickly.
- Do not actually read the text in total. You may read a few words of every paragraph, perhaps the first and last sentences.

Always familiarise yourself with the material by gaining an overview and skimming before reading in detail.

3. Scanning

What is it? Scanning is sweeping your eyes (like radar) over part of a text to find specific pieces of information.

When to use it: to quickly locate specific information from a large quantity of written material.

To Scan text:

- After gaining an overview and skimming, identify the section(s) of the text that you probably need to read.
- Start scanning the text by allowing your eyes (or finger) to move quickly over a page.
- As soon as your eye catches an important word or

phrase, stop reading.

- When you locate information requiring attention, slow down to read the relevant section more thoroughly.

Scanning and skimming are no substitutes for thorough reading and should only be used to locate material quickly.

4. Intensive reading

What is it? Intensive reading is detailed, focused, 'study' reading of those important parts, pages or chapters.

When to use it: When you have previewed an article and used the techniques of skimming and scanning to find what you need to concentrate on, then you can slow down and do some intensive reading.

How to read intensively:

- Start at the beginning. Underline any unfamiliar words or phrases, but do not stop the flow of your reading.
- If the text is relatively easy, underline, highlight or make brief notes (see 'the section on making notes from readings').
- If the text is difficult, read it through at least once (depending on the level of difficulty) before making notes.
- Be alert to the main ideas. Each paragraph should have a main idea, usually contained in the topic sentence (usually the first sentence) or that last sentence.
- When you have finished go back to the unfamiliar vocabulary. Look it up in an ordinary or subject-specific dictionary. If the meaning of a word or passage still evades you, leave it and read on. Perhaps after more reading you will find it more accessible and the meaning will become clear. Speak to your tutor if your difficulty continues.
- Write down the bibliographic information and be sure to record page numbers (more about this in the section on making notes from readings).

Remember, when approaching reading at university you need to make intelligent decisions about what you choose to read, be flexible in the way you read, and think about what you are trying to achieve in undertaking each reading task.

5. Critical Reading

Being critical in an academic context does not mean simply criticising or 'finding fault'. It means understanding how ideas have been arrived at, and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. Here are some of the main features of critical reading.

- Recognising the writer's purpose and underlying values (social, cultural and historical influences).
- Recognising patterns of the argument.
- Linking ideas in the text to other ideas and texts.
- Exploring alternatives to the stated idea.
- Recognising the assumptions and underlying values that you bring to your reading.

Being an ACTIVE reader means being a CRITICAL reader. The purpose of critical reading is to gain a deeper understanding of the material. It involves reading in depth and actively questioning what you read. Some questions you should ask yourself while reading are in the right-hand column.

Asking questions as you read

As you read a section of a book or article, look for information to help you answer the following questions.

1. The author's purpose

- Why has the author written the material? For whom is it intended?
- What theoretical perspective has the author taken? How does this perspective relate to other material in the field?

2. Content

- What is the main theme, thesis or argument?
- What main points are used to support this thesis? What explanation or evidence is used to support the main points?
- Do the main ideas seem well researched and accurate? Is the evidence correct (as far as you know)?
- Which aspects of the topic has the author chosen to concentrate on and which to omit?
- Has a contemporary issue or a particular philosophy influenced the author's argument? Is the author putting forward a particular point of view?
- What are the author's assumptions? Are these explicitly stated?
- Is there any evidence of deliberate bias, such as interpretation of material or choice of sources?
- Does any graphic material illustrate or restate the written content?
- How do the contents relate to what you know about the topic?
- Which of your questions about the subject does the author answer? Which are left unanswered?
- Do any items puzzle or intrigue you?

3. Structure

- What is the framework used to organise the material? Is it clearly explained?
- How is the theme/thesis/argument reflected in the structure?
- How is the content organised and developed within the framework?
- How does the conclusion relate to the introduction and to the rest of the material?

4. Style and format

- In what style has the material been written? For example, is it formal or informal, simple or complex, didactic or persuasive, narrative, analytical?
- How does the style and format influence your reaction to the material?

6. Reading to Remember: The SQ3R Method

What is it? As reading is one of the core activities of study, you need to be able to understand what you read and to be able to recall the main ideas when you need them. You can use the SQ3R method to help you remember a reading for tutorials, seminars or to revise for exams.

When to use it: When you want to commit important aspects of a reading to memory, when you want to increase your understanding of a reading, when you want to focus on challenging material and concepts.

See *The Learning Centre's guide 'Reading for Understanding: The SQW3R Method of Study'*

Reading difficult material

When you're faced with reading material that seems above your level of understanding—whether it's a couple of pages, a journal article or an entire book—it's easy to feel overwhelmed. However, don't give up; the ability to absorb challenging or 'dry' material is an essential skill for uni study.

Try the following:

- If you're feeling snowed under by the amount of reading you need to complete, **break it up into chunks**. Choose a moderate amount of material and set yourself the goal of completing it and of working to understand it.
- **Skim the reading and get an overview**. Read titles, headings, sub-headings, and any summaries or abstracts. Note any graphs, charts, and diagrams. Quickly read topic sentences (the first sentence of each paragraph) to get a general idea of what the reading is about.
- **Read first for what you do understand and don't get caught up in the difficult parts**. Skim over passages that are really difficult and mark or flag what you don't understand to re-read later. Even a partial understanding will make re-reading easier on your second attempt.
- **Ask yourself questions** about the reading. Work out what you do understand and what you do not. Try to make connections and associations between what you are reading and what you already know. Revisit the parts you found difficult. How do/ might they fit in with what you do understand?
- Are there **extra resources** that would help to improve your understanding?
 - If you need more background material, find an additional source.
 - If you're confused about vocabulary or discipline-specific terms, read with a dictionary on hand and look up important words.
 - Find a subject-specific dictionary and do likewise.
- It can help to **write while you read**. Underline, make notes, and/or write short summaries that help you concentrate and grasp difficult ideas.
- When you finish reading, **review to see what you have learned**, and reread those ideas that are not clear. Pause and try to restate difficult ideas in your own words.
- **Don't give up**. Complete your reading goal and don't get discouraged if there are parts you still don't understand. Some material is challenging and it's important to work towards understanding it. Ideas can become clearer the more you read.
- **If you still don't understand a reading, don't panic**. Set it aside, and read it again the next day. This gives your brain the chance to process the material. If the reading is still a challenge, talking ideas through often helps. Consult with your tutor or lecturer. Talk about it with other students.

References

Baker, W D 1974, *Reading skills*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.

Beisler, F 1985, *Communication skills*, Pittman Publishing, Melbourne.

Dudley, G A 1964, *Rapid reading*, Psychology Publishing Co Ltd, Cheshire.

Improved Reading Centre 1987, *Advanced reading skills course notes*, Personal Publishing, Milsons Point.

Marshall, L & Rowland, F 1993, *A guide to learning independently*, Longman, Melbourne.

Wood, N 1991, *College Reading and Study Skills*, Holt Rinehart and Winston, USA.