

Navigating
the page.
An academic
guide to effective
reading



At university you are expected to support your lectures with your own reading around the subject. You will also need to read widely as part of your research for essays and dissertations.

Reading for academic and research purposes is very different from reading for leisure. It is important that you develop and improve your skills for reading academically, so that you are more efficient and can pick out relevant information more effectively. All your tutors will emphasise the need to **read critically**. In other words, they want you to consider what you are reading and weigh up what is being said in relation to what other people have written.

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1. Preparing to read

Before reading, ask yourself the following questions:

- Why am I reading this?
- What do I want to find?
- What information do I already know, and will the text 'fill in the gaps' for me?

When you start to read you should ask yourself what type of information you need or want. This can fall into three categories: Literal, Inferential or Critical.

Literal

For example:

- Who was responsible for making Laws?

Inferential

For example:

- Can you find evidence in your reading that a specific Law is effective?
- What do different people say? Whose arguments are stronger?

Critical

For example:

- Has the author given enough evidence to be convincing? (think of your own reading on a topic)
- Are the results reliable and valid?
- Is the author's interpretation sound?

1.1 Types of reading material

You will read from a variety of primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources (original documents)

For example:

- Newspaper articles
- Manuscripts
- Religious literature
- Memoirs
- Memorandums and letters
- Speeches and government reports
- Statistics and experimental data
- Poems, plays and classic texts

Websites: some websites provide access to primary materials and documents. See *Learn, discover, develop & create. University of Southampton guide to research* for links to some key resources.

Secondary sources (analysis of original documents or data)

For example:

- Academic book: a credible and reliable academic work on an original research topic (i.e. not a popular discussion of the subject)
- Journal: a collection of academic essays on a theme
- Review: an academic appraisal of a book, article or film
- Text book: an overview of a subject, but not original research
- Dictionaries and encyclopaedias: short paragraphs or articles as reference works

Website: see *Learn, discover, develop & create. University of Southampton guide to research* for a list of reliable academic gateways to articles

1.2 Suitable texts

You need to ask yourself: “Does this book, chapter or article contain the information or evidence I need for my assignment or task?” If it does then it is worth using; if some of it is useful, use those sections in particular; if not, then it may not be what you need for your particular work or may be useful only for background information or personal interest or developing your ideas.

Remember books, chapters and articles have not been written especially so that you can answer the question posed by your tutor. They may go into a lot of complicated depth which is not relevant to your current needs.

Also remember that each author has designed their work to make a coherent argument, and as such a work has often been constructed to have a beginning, middle and an end. Be careful of dipping into a book as an author may be outlining a position that they then go on to refute.

You should consider the date when a book or article was written and ask yourself if this is the latest information and research, or is it now out-of-date. Books published many years ago can still be extremely valuable for certain subjects, but will reflect the scholarship of their age. For example, a book written during the Cold War may be useful for reflecting attitudes of the time, but may not be reliable for providing an account of Cold War politics from the perspective of modern scholarship. Alternatively, statistics describing the impact of passive smoking on health from the 1980s will be useful to illustrate the health situation at that time, but would not be an accurate source to discuss the impact of passive smoking after the smoking ban in the UK.

You may also like to refer to the academic skills guide *Making the case* which will give you tips on effective search strategies.

2. Styles of reading

Find out if you need to improve your efficiency.

Look at these questions to find out more about the way you tackle background reading, reading for assignments, reading for literature reviews and reading to increase knowledge and understanding. Tick those questions to which you answer Yes.

		TICK
1	Do you read a chapter or journal article from start to finish and have a fuzzy idea of what was said?	
2	Does it take you a long time to do the necessary reading for your course?	
3	Do you find that the chapters or books or articles seem to go above your head?	
4	Do you read word by word?	
5	Do you 'say' the words silently to yourself in your head as you read?	
6	Do you have to read and re-read sections?	
7	Do you read advanced texts and journal articles infrequently?	
8	Do you vary the pace of your reading?	

If you have ticked four or more of these boxes, you need to improve your reading efficiency.

You need to vary your reading style and speed according to the material you are reading. There are three styles of reading, which we use in different situations: scanning, skimming and detailed reading.

2.1 Scanning: for a specific focus

Scanning is most useful when you are searching for something specific in the text – like a word or phrase. An example of scanning is when you look in the index of a book to see which page contains the information you want.

You can use the same skill in academic reading to find the material that is relevant to you. Move your eye quickly over the page to find particular words or phrases that are of significance to the task you are doing. This will provide you with an overview of the reading matter so you can decide if it is relevant to your research and worth reading in more detail. Always ask yourself if the material will be helpful for your assignment.

It is useful to scan key parts of texts to see if the material will be useful to you:

- The introduction or preface of a book
- The first line of each new paragraph in a chapter or article
- The concluding chapter of a book or paragraph of an article
- The abstract of a journal, which contains a summary of the article and the rationale for the study

2.2 Skimming: for getting the gist of something

Skimming is a particular style of reading. It is a way of gathering as much information as possible from a text in the shortest time possible. Skimming is a visual activity and is used for getting the gist or impression of a chapter or section of text. You are not reading the whole page and your eyes do not move from left to right along the line, as they do when reading a whole text. Aim to read quickly to get the main points, and skip over the detail.

It is useful to skim:

- To preview a passage before you read it in detail
- To refresh your understand of a passage after you have read it in detail
- To decide if a book in the library or bookshop is right for you

2.3 Detailed reading: for extracting information accurately

This is where you read text more closely, and work to learn from the text. You will do careful reading after you have scanned the text to see if it is relevant and skimmed the text to get a general idea of the topic.

When reading in detail:

- Ask yourself questions and search for the answers in order to focus your reading
- Read the article critically and analyse and evaluate the findings
- Avoid **backtracking** when reading. Backtracking is when you read a few words and then go back over them because you have not understood the point properly or were not concentrating. By doing this you are interrupting the flow of reading. It is far better to get to the end of a section by reading it straight through and then re-reading it if necessary.
- Avoid 'sounding out' words in your head as you read. This slows you down.

Remember: reading improves with practice, and the more you are familiar with advanced reading techniques the more quickly you will be able to get access to the information.

3. Active reading

When you are reading for your course, you need to make sure you are actively involved with the text. It is a waste of your time to just passively read, the way you would read a novel on holiday.

Find out if you need to improve how you are interacting with text.

Tick the boxes which apply to you:

		TICK
1	Do you know exactly what you are looking for?	
2	Can you select important and/or relevant information for your purpose?	
3	Can you pick out key words and/or information?	
4	Do you vary your style of reading depending on the nature of the task?	
5	When you absorb information do you know what to do with it?	

		TICK
6	Do you regularly monitor your own understanding of the texts you are reading?	
7	Do you know how to improve your reading comprehension?	
8	Do you try to anticipate what is coming next?	

If you have ticked four or less of these boxes, you need to be a more active reader.

Here are five tips for active reading:

Underlining and highlighting

Pick out and underline or highlight in photocopied texts what you think are the most important parts of what you are reading, or quotations you may like to use as supporting evidence. As you are reading, you will have to make decisions about the information in order to select what is most important (if you have highlighted an entire page then you are not being selective or critical enough). Highlight text **after** you have read a passage to make sure you are only highlighting the key information.

Note key words or points

Record the main headings and subheadings as you read. Use one or two keywords for each point. When you do not want to mark the text, keep a folder of notes you make while reading. If you are using photocopies, you can write a key word beside each paragraph so you can scan later for the relevant section.

Questions

Before you start reading an article, a chapter or a whole book, prepare for your reading by noting down questions you want the material to answer. While you are reading, note down questions which the author raises.

Summaries

Pause after you have read a section of text. Then:

- put what you have read into your own words
- skim through the text and check the accuracy of your summary
- fill in any gaps

Post-it notes

Use Post-it notes to mark pages and quotes of interest to which you may like to return.

You should learn a huge amount from your reading. You will get far more benefit from it if you train your mind to learn rather than if you read passively.

3.1 SQ3R technique

Try the SQ3R technique. SQ3R stands for **S**urvey, **Q**uestion, **R**ead, **R**ecall and **R**eview.

In general, skim the text to see if it is suitable for your needs and to get an idea of the subject matter. Then:

Survey

Gather the information you need to focus on the work and set goals:

- Read the title to help prepare for the subject
- Read the introduction or summary to see what the author thinks are the key points
- Notice the boldface headings to see the structure of the text
- Notice any maps, graphs or charts – they are there for a purpose
- Notice the reading aids, italics, bold face, questions at the end of the chapter – they are all there to help you understand and remember

Question

Help your mind to engage and concentrate. Your mind is engaged in learning when it is actively looking for answers to questions. Try turning the boldface headings into questions you think the section should answer. Ask yourself why you are reading the text and what you want to get out of it so that you read with a specific focus. Your comprehension improves if your mind is actively searching for answers to questions.

Read

Read carefully, breaking up your reading into small sections, looking for main ideas. Read each section with your questions in mind. Look for the answers, and make up new questions if necessary.

Recall

After each section, go through the ideas you have just read and pick out the main points. Stop and think back to your questions. See if you can answer them. If not, take a look back at the text. Do this as often as you need to. Check that you have assimilated and gathered the information you need.

Review

Once you have finished a whole chapter, look back to see if the passage has answered everything you wanted. Go back over all the questions from all the headings and check you can answer them.

4. Spotting authors' navigation aids

Sequences

Learn to recognise phrases which indicate a sequence of points, for example: “*Three advantages of...*” or “*A number of methods are available...*” leads you to expect several points to follow. The first sentence of a paragraph will often indicate a sequence: “*One important cause of...*” followed by “*Another important factor...*” and so on, until “*The final cause of...*”

Signal words

Look out for signal words which indicate the type of argument that is being presented. See the academic skills guide *Posing the question* for a list of essay instruction words and the academic skills guide *Hammering the prose* for a list of paragraph signal words.

Structure of text

Finding the answers to the following points will mean that you have to examine the way text is put together, and this will help with comprehension and speed of access to information:

- Where are chapter summaries usually found – at the beginning or the end of a chapter?
- Are the chapters broken down into appropriate sub-headings?
- Do the sub-headings give me an overview of the structure of the chapter?
- Is there a revision section at the end of a chapter?
- How is key terminology presented – bold, underlined or a separate glossary?
- Does each section contain a summary statement at the beginning or the end?
- Does each section have subsidiary and supporting material or evidence or examples after summary statements?
- Are diagrammatic features used to explain prose text?
- Are tables and graphs used to explain prose text?
- Is the sequencing of the information obvious in the text layout?

General and particular

Differentiate between the point the author wishes to make and the supporting evidence for it. General points are often illustrated by particular examples, for example:

General:	Birds' beaks are appropriately shaped for feeding.
Particular:	Sparrows and other seed-eating birds have short, stubby beaks; wrens and other insect eaters have thin pointed beaks; herons and other fish hunters have long, sharp beaks for spearing their prey.

5. Words and vocabulary

You can use reading as an opportunity to increase your vocabulary and learn more complex or technical language related to your subject.

- Choose a large dictionary rather than one which is 'compact' or 'concise'. You want one which is big enough to define words clearly and helpfully. A comprehensive dictionary will be more precise and detailed than a compact version
- Keep your dictionary at hand when you are studying and look up unfamiliar words
- If you have not got your dictionary with you, note down words which you do not understand and look them up later
- A thesaurus will help you to identify synonyms
- Improve your vocabulary by reading widely
- You can also use online dictionaries to help you. For example:

Oxford English Dictionary Online

<http://www.oed.com/>

Merriam-Webster Online

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>

6. Critical reading

Critical approaches to reading are vital. Much of this is to do with the way you interact with text, such as through the type of questions you ask yourself when reading. Reading critically is usually achieved when you have a working knowledge and understanding of the issues, theories or topics that you are studying.

6.1 Critical reading: what is it?

To read critically is to make judgements about **how** a text is argued. This is a highly reflective skill requiring you to ‘stand back’ and gain some distance from the text you are reading. You might have to read a text through once to get a basic grasp of content before you launch into an intensive critical reading.

The key to critical reading:

- Do not read only for information
- Do read for ways of thinking about the subject matter

Find out if you need to improve your critical reading skills.

Tick the boxes which apply to you:

		TICK
1	Do you think about what you are reading and question what the author has written?	
2	Do you try to assess the stance of the author?	
3	Do you challenge the ideas as you are reading?	
4	Are you able to distinguish different kinds of reasoning used?	
5	Are you able to synthesise the key information and make connections between what one author and others are saying?	
6	Can you make judgements about how the text is argued?	
7	Can you evaluate how the information could be better or differently supported?	
8	Can you spot assumptions which have not been well argued?	

If you have ticked four or less of these boxes, you need to improve your critical reading skills.

6.2 Getting started

Whatever you are reading, you should find out and be aware of the author’s background. It is important to recognise the perspective given to writing by a writer’s political, religious and social context. Also, learn which newspapers and journals represent a particular standpoint. For example, compare the headlines of the *Guardian* and *Daily Mail*

newspapers for the way they present the latest news stories.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk>

In general, ask yourself the following:

- Can I believe everything I read?
- Are experts always right?
- What makes me take more notice of one academic writer and less of another?
- What makes a scholarly, rigorous piece of research, and what makes research findings weak or strong?

Try this for yourself. Choose a chapter or an article and find out answers to the following questions:

- Who is the author's audience?
- What are the central claims of the text?
- What is the main evidence?
- How has the author analysed the material to set up an argument?
- How is this substantiated?
- What assumptions lie behind the evidence or arguments?
- Do you think the assumptions are founded on adequate proof?
- What methodology was used?
- What are the general weaknesses or strengths?
- What do other leading thinkers or writers have to say about this?

6.3 The type of evidence used

You should also consider the kinds of evidence used:

- Primary or Secondary sources – these will be different for different subject disciplines
- Is the evidence statistical?
- Is it anecdotal?
- How does the author use this evidence to develop the argument?
- How is it connected with central ideas and themes?

6.4 What is your evaluation?

- You need to consider and decide if the arguments and accompanying evidence are strong or weak
- Do you think the argument could have been made differently or supported in a different way?
- Can you spot any gaps, un-argued assumptions or inconsistencies?
- Look at the conclusions and ask yourself if the evidence supports the conclusions

Once you approach texts in this way you will be reading critically.