

# Reading effectively

## Academic Tip Sheet



### This academic tip sheet:

- describes the reading expectations of universities;
- explains how to develop good reading habits;
- looks at effective reading strategies;
- describes how to make your reading active; and
- examines how you can learn to evaluate what you read.

### How does reading prepare you for study?

Tertiary level study involves extensive reading to develop the frameworks of knowledge obtained from lectures, tutorials and labs. Most of this reading will involve academic texts that are typically dense, information-rich sources, riddled with jargon and abstract ideas that are expressed in complex language. To manage the scope and nature of reading, it is necessary to adjust **how** you read.

### Scope of reading

You will be expected to read a wide range of materials, including textbooks, handouts, journal articles, online sources, newspapers, and reports. Your lecturers will usually indicate the amount and range of reading that's expected in each unit, and such expectations are likely to vary from one unit to another. To manage the volume of reading, it is essential to prioritise your reading in each unit (e.g. essential, recommended, further/additional reading) and to do your readings as a routine study activity.

## Purposes for reading

What and how you read will depend on your purpose for reading. Some of your purposes for reading will include reading to:

- gain a general overview of a chapter in preparation for a lecture;
- prepare for a tutorial/ discussion;
- find specific information to answer a question/solve a problem;
- prepare for assignments; and
- prepare for tests/exams.

## Approaches to reading

When reading it is important to consider how much detail is required and the amount of time you are able to devote to the task. This will help you set a realistic target of what you can accomplish within a given time. It is helpful to approach the reading task by first developing a basic understanding of the topic, before launching into in-depth study of a topic. To facilitate this, you should read your lecture notes, handouts and textbook first. Then consult other sources, such as journal articles and online sources that may be listed as recommended reading, or ones that you may discover through your independent research.

## Create a positive environment

Your reading should be done in an environment conducive to learning. Try to:

- eliminate distractions to improve your concentration;
- plan reading sessions (time and goals);
- work in a comfortable and uncluttered environment; and
- have the study materials you need (lecture notes, textbooks, etc.) within easy reach.

## Effective reading strategies

Reading is influenced by the nature of the content, familiarity with the subject matter and language competency. Complex and abstract ideas, inadequate background knowledge of a subject area and underdeveloped English language skills can all affect the ease with which you are able to read academic texts. To deal with these and other difficulties vary the reading strategies that you use.

## Effective reading strategies

**Scanning:** This is reading to find specific information to answer a question/solve a problem. Use your knowledge of how information is organised to quickly find relevant content (e.g., abstract, introduction, conclusion, summary, tables, etc.). This will enable you to:

- locate the relevant sections; and
- read only as much as you need to find the relevant information.

**Skimming:** This is a quick initial reading to establish usefulness or obtain an overview (gist). Browse, survey the content, dip into different parts of the book/chapter.

**Reading topic sentences:** Do this before in-depth reading. Also useful when reading dense texts or new content. Read the topic sentence of each paragraph. This will provide an overview of the key ideas.

**Reading for detail:** Re-read the dense/main parts of the text after you have identified the main argument so as to extract any supporting evidence, or to evaluate the content. Read slowly, paying attention to detail. Analyse the content as you read by:

- connecting related ideas;
- considering varying viewpoints;
- Identifying key principles;
- applying the ideas or transferring the knowledge; and
- evaluating the argument in relation to the evidence.

**Reading to improve writing:** Improve your writing by noticing the structure and techniques used in the reading (modelling). Take note of the:

- overall structure;
- paragraph structure and length;
- construction of argument;
- use of evidence;
- analysis and synthesis of literature;
- transitions/discourse markers (linking & flow); and
- language usage and academic style.

## Active reading techniques

Active reading techniques relate to ways in which you engage with the text. These are important because they help to improve your concentration, and therefore also assist with memory and retention. This ultimately enhances learning. Some examples of active reading behaviours include:

- underlining/highlighting key ideas;
- varying your pace as you read;
- reading parts aloud;
- summarising as you read (using your own words when making notes);
- forming questions;
- annotating the text; and
- stopping at strategic points to review and consolidate what you've read (before reading further).

## Read critically

You are expected to be 'critical' when reading academic work. This means carefully considering the author's intention and the

evidence and ideas used to convince the reader. Rather than accepting everything you read, you are expected to evaluate what you read. Consider the following questions to improve your critical analysis:

- What credibility does the author have in this field?
- What is significant or important about this reading?
- What claims are being made? What is the basis of the claims? What evidence is used?
- How logical are the ideas? Do the conclusions follow from the evidence?
- How valid and generally applicable are the conclusions?

## Effective reading checklist

- **Have you established a positive reading environment?**
- **Have you established the purpose for your reading?**
- **Are you using the appropriate reading strategy?**
- **Are you using active reading techniques?**
- **Are you reading critically?**

## References

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