Finding it and making sense of it

Much of university is about gathering, processing and understanding information and presenting it in a thoughtful and ordered way.

Where can you find information useful for research?

There are many resources that you can use when conducting research. The library holds a huge collection of books and journals that are searchable through the library catalogues and databases; the internet, if used wisely, can provide a rich source of easily available information. Inspiration for research can come from your lectures and lecturers, newspapers, conference proceedings, and discussions with your peers. However, remember that when writing an essay, you must always include references for the sources you use (see Transition Bites ‘Referencing’).

Getting started with research

Before you do any research, you need to know what you are going to be researching. You must spend some time analysing your question to figure out what you need to find out and how you are expected to write about it (see Essay Structuring). Spend some time mind mapping your question before you even do any reading: form some questions about what you know and don’t know. This is a time when it can be easier to be thoughtful, questioning and creative as you have not yet read a lot about a subject; often students are reluctant to criticise authorities and researchers. This question analysis will focus your research. Start off your research on a small scale and build upon it gradually; this will avoid the reading of irrelevant material or too much on one topic - your research should be just as planned and structured as your essay (see overleaf for advice).

Choosing a question

You may have to choose a question and this can be difficult; it is often tempting to go for the shortest looking question, the easiest sounding one, or the one with the least complicated words. Always make sure you read each question thoroughly and spend a short amount of time analysing them - here you can figure out what each one will entail more clearly. You should tackle a question you have an interest in, may know a little about already, and that you understand.

Getting started with reading

You should make sure you are set up in an environment that suits YOUR learning needs; everyone is different.

> You should create a regular place of work so that when you settle there your brain knows it is time to study.
> Set up a study ritual: you may have a morning or nighttime ritual that triggers sleep or action - you can also set up a ritual for study. 1 - Make some tea, tag your reading pages with a post-it, write 5 questions you want to answer. 2 - make a coffee, write down the references of your reading, turn on some Mozart.
> Choose somewhere that has lots of light - dim lighting will hurt your eyes and make you feel sleepy.
> Make sure you have pens, paper, ruler, books, post-its, etc to hand - you will get distracted if you have to get up to find them.
> Drink plenty of water - dehydration will make you sleepy.
> Start with something easy - a short review article, a summary text - this will ‘get you in the mood’ for study.
> Schedule when you will take a break, it’s easier to start when you know when you are going to stop. It is difficult to concentrate for long lengths of time and reading academic texts takes a lot of concentration, so take regular breaks!
> If reading for an assignment, you should always take notes (see overleaf for note taking tips).
Proactive research: books and journals
Spending time carefully sourcing your readings will save you lots of time in the long run as you avoid reading irrelevant information.

- Use your reading lists to identify books that may be useful, remember you are not expected to read everything!
- Use the bibliographies of key texts to find more resources.
- Mind map your essay before you do any reading - this will guide your research and avoid irrelevant reading.
- Look at indexes and contents to narrow down your research.
- Create a resources index for each assignment - when you Skim introductions and conclusions to check for relevance.
- Look at indexes and contents to narrow down your research.
- Always check the dates of books and journal articles - has new research been published?
- Always check the dates of data presented - even if the paper presented is current the data may be older.
- Look for responses and replies to journal articles - you will find current critiques and counter arguments here.

Reading techniques

- Skim the introduction and conclusion before you start; read the abstract if there is one. You want to get an idea of what the reading is about.
- Start with something general if you need to - reading is easier if you have a broad overview of the topic you are going to read about.
- Pose some questions - you will get more out of a text if your brain knows what it is looking for.
- Monitor your understanding - read a few sentences then think about it. Sum up what you have read in your head.
- Make notes by paragraph - do not take lots of notes as you go along. Read a paragraph then think about it and summarise it.
- Re-read difficult paragraphs - don't worry about doing this, as academic texts are often hard.
- Finger-tracking - this will train your eye to move more quickly down the text.
- Read aloud - reading silently can speed up reading, but when a passage is difficult or you are finding it hard to concentrate, reading aloud can bring you back on track.
- Read selectively - you are not expected to read everything. Choose relevant reading so you do not waste time.
- Rhythm read - read chunks of words syllables (3 or 4) together in a rhythmic fashion, do this sentence by sentence. This encourages you to reach the end of a sentence rather than re-reading the same part over and over.
- Use different coloured paper, a text enlarger, or talking text reader if you need to (visit the library for more info).

Keeping up-to-date with current research

- Find out which are the best journals for your subject - browse the most current issues for up-to-date research. You can sign up for journal newsletters and more on their websites.
- Register for citation alerts on journal host websites (Elsevier, Ingenta Connect, etc) - each time another author cites an article you have flagged, you will be alerted.

Note taking tips

- 'Read in paragraphs to get the 'gist' of it before you write any notes - notes are about ideas not lengthy quotations'
- 'Leave space for your own thoughts’
- ‘Write down some questions to answer before you start reading to focus your mind’
- ‘Write down everything you need to locate a reference - it will be impossible to find again!’
- ‘Read without your pen in your hand so you won't be tempted to copy out of the book’
- ‘Avoid taking lots of line by line notes - keywords and summaries will be more efficient later and create a greater understanding long term’
- ‘Write down quotations in a different colour’
- ‘If you have trouble drawing out the main ideas, practice by re-drafting your notes into a more condensed format after you've written them. Or read a paragraph and draw out 10 keywords - then use these keywords to form a summary sentence’
- ‘Use a mind map to take notes - this forces you to use keywords and truly understand what you are reading’
- ‘Use separate pieces of paper for each text - even for each different topic. This will help when organising your essay’

Internet research

The internet can be a useful tool for research, but beware - not all sources are credible. Use the internet when conducting initial research around a topic - Google Scholar will identify key authors, journals, and articles that surround a topic which will allow you an initial overview, you may be able to link to online journal articles from here. You can also use the internet for background definitions. The internet gives access to a great deal of information that may be useful such as, newspapers, government papers, financial data and library catalogues. Generally in terms of credibility, websites ending .org, .gov, .ac.uk are credible, whereas .com and .co.uk are unlikely to be. Try to only use the internet for initial background research and never cite from non-credible websites.

Using Online Journals

Online journal databases are an effective way of searching the current research being published in your field. You can use UCL’s database list to search many journal titles at one time for key words and phrases, or you can pick a particular journal and search within that. Take your time trying different keyword combinations, as there are often hundreds of results. Search within results as well if this helps to narrow down the number of articles you find. If you find a good article you can then use the clickable bibliography from this to link to other related articles.