

Student Disability Services

Effective Reading

Techniques to maximise the benefits gained from academic reading

The problem with reading at university is that there is so much of it and you may be worried about how you will keep up. This information sheet should help you, not to read more or to read faster, but to read more effectively.

Academic Reading

When you read a novel, or a magazine article, it makes sense to start at the beginning and read straight through to the end. You probably wouldn't think of reading the end first or looking through the book to read all the chapter headings. The purpose of reading for pleasure is usually to enjoy a story and then move on to something else. It doesn't matter how much of it, if anything, you remember afterwards.

Academic reading, on the other hand, serves a range of different purposes, but most will involve remembering and making use of some of the content afterwards. It may not be necessary to read a text all the way through; it just depends why you are reading it in the first place.

Adopt an active approach

Reading can be a relatively passive process; not as passive as watching television, but it is possible to read without absorbing the content of the text. This is especially so if the process of reading (decoding the text) is challenging.

By following the guidance below, you will be able to change your reading into a more active and engaging process, from which you will derive greater benefit. An added advantage is that you may be able to read less, quality being more valuable than quantity.

Identify objectives to give yourself a context

First of all, think about why you are reading a particular text. Is it in preparation for a tutorial or seminar? Are you researching an essay? Are you revising for an exam?

Think about what you might expect to gain from reading the particular paper or chapter. What do you know about the subject already? Are you looking out for particular information? Can you anticipate the issues likely to be raised? Are you particularly interested (in a scientific paper) in the design and methodology or in the results? Is the literature review of more interest?

Make a few notes about your expectations of the text and try to think of, and write down, a few questions that may be answered during your reading. By doing this you are giving yourself a context for your reading, and already the process is more active. As you read, you will be relating the content of the text to the thought you have had about it and the notes you have written.

Survey the text

Depending on the objective you have identified, you might not need to read the whole text. Whether you end up doing so or not, it's a good idea to survey the text first. Flick through to see how long it is – short enough to deal with in one sitting or will it entail several hours' work? If there are headings, look at those to give you an idea of the structure of the text. If there is an abstract, read that for an overview of the content, making a few notes or a mind-map. Next, read the introduction or first section / paragraph, followed by the last section, again making notes or a mind-map of the key points. You can survey further by reading the first sentence of every paragraph as this is where most information is likely to be found. Some people find it helpful to think of and write down a question raised by reading each of these first sentences. These questions can then form an outline structure for your later note-taking.

Throughout the survey process, keep your objectives in mind and refer to the questions you thought of before starting to read.

You can stop reading and set the text aside as soon as you have achieved your objective; the text has served its purpose. This could even happen as soon as you have read the abstract. On the other hand, you may need to go on to read in detail. If a text is written in a style which is jargon-loaded and hard to read, try looking for another text on the same subject with a clearer writing style.

Detailed Reading

Having already done your survey, and having decided that you need to give more attention to the particular paper or chapter, you may need to read it from start to finish. But you will already have quite a lot of knowledge about the structure and content, which will make it easier to engage with this next process. Taking notes related to your objective will also help you to focus. You may wish to use a highlighter (if you are reading from a photocopy) but do this sparingly - it's very easy to find you've turned almost the whole text pink or yellow, which is a bit pointless.

Re-read key information (it's perfectly normal to have to re-read academic texts), and relate the content to your original expectations.

Comprehension

Be aware of different levels of understanding of content. Some information will be stated in the text and can be accepted at face value; some can be inferred: Inferential comprehension involves awareness of the perspective of the author and is important when interpreting a text. In general, academic reading demands an analytical and reflective approach to comprehension.

Keep a reading record

You never know when your reading will be useful in another setting; something you have read for a tutorial might be relevant to an essay or dissertation. So that you can keep track of your reading, it can be a good idea to write a summary (just a few lines) of the content immediately after engaging with the text (even if you have only surveyed it). Record the full reference too. You can then build up a full, referenced record of your degree course reading. You won't then have the alarming experience of spending weeks and weeks going through a whole pile of readings and ending up unable to remember anything about the content or what you might be able to use it for.