

Academic Reading

When you get to university, you will find you need to get through a lot of readings either from your reading list or for wider reading in preparation for an assignment. These may be journal articles, chapters in edited books, or chapters in textbooks. Many of these academic texts will seem quite difficult, especially to begin with. Don't despair! If you learn how to preview your readings first, you can select those readings or sections of a reading that are most relevant to your needs and reduce your reading list. There are a range of strategies that you can use to make the task less overwhelming.

1. Identify your purpose for reading

Your unit information will provide a reading list. This list will usually be divided into required readings and recommended readings. Always begin with the required readings. Ideally, these will be general texts that can give you an overview of the topic. Once you have a general idea of the course content, more specific or detailed texts will be easier to understand.

To make the most of your reading, you need to be able to identify your purpose. In many cases, this purpose will be identified in questions included in the unit information. These questions will make it easier to understand what you are reading.

If there are no questions, you need to identify more specific purposes for reading because **why** you are reading will determine **how** you read. The way you read a novel, a newspaper, a telephone book, and an academic article will be different because your purpose for reading will be different each time. There are three main types of reading that people do:

- **Reading for quick reference** – when you need to find particular information
- **Reading for pleasure** – to relax, for fun, or because you like the writer's style
- **Critical reading** – to understand/analyse ideas or concepts

Some reasons for reading might be:

- to locate names or numbers
- to find a description of an event
- to find details of an experiment
- to gain an overall impression
- to identify the main theme
- to identify the structure of an argument
- to identify main points
- to evaluate the style
- to evaluate the author's point of view

2. Some reading techniques

Because there is so much to read when you are studying at university, you need to **read selectively**. The pre-reading stage is an important step in the reading process.

● *Pre-reading*

Before you begin to read, preview the text. What is the title? Who is the author? When was it published? Who is the publisher?

You can **scan** the text when you need to find specific information such as a name or a date. When you scan, you do not actually read the text; instead, you search for a particular item. You can also scan a text to identify the sections that are important for you.

You can **skim** the text to gain an overall impression of a text. The technique involves reading the title, the first paragraph, the first sentence of each of the body paragraphs, and the last paragraph. Also look at any graphics in the text. By skimming a text, you can decide if it is relevant and you can prepare yourself for a more detailed reading of the text. Since you have already gained an overall impression, your detailed reading will be more meaningful.

● *Effective reading*

There is a range of strategies that you can use to ensure you get the most out of your reading. **Be active while you read.** You can do this by asking questions, making notes, and keeping a vocabulary list.

Asking questions

The questions may be about the purpose:

- Why has the author written the text?
- What theoretical perspective does the author take?
- Are the purposes stated explicitly or are there underlying biases?

Or about the content:

- What is the main idea/theme in the text?
- What evidence is used to support the main points?
- Is the evidence convincing? Why/why not?

Making notes

When you read a text in detail, you should make notes. Many students indiscriminately highlight material as they read. If you do highlight, only apply it to key words and phrases, and always follow up with some sort of written note or summary. Making notes is much better than highlighting, as you are not only summarising the text, but you are also more likely to remember what you have read.

You don't need to stick to writing words when you make your notes. Be creative. Draw diagrams and pictures if they help.

What to note:

- Key elements, such as the theme/thesis/argument, central ideas, major characters, or crucial information.
- The author's purposes and assumptions (explicit and implicit).
- Single phrases or sentences that encapsulate key elements or the author's purpose and assumptions.
- Details or facts that appeal to you, such as a useful statistic or a vivid image.

- Items to follow up, such as a question, an idea that offers further possibilities, a puzzling comment, an unfamiliar word, an explanation you do not understand, or an opinion you question.

Keeping a vocabulary list

As you read, write down any new or difficult words. Look these up in a dictionary and try to use them in a sentence or explain what they mean in your own words. This will help you to remember the word. Compile a glossary of key terms and concepts in your discipline.

3. Overcoming reading difficulties

As a student, there are times when the reading you need to do makes little sense, even after you have applied various reading techniques. Here are additional ideas to help clear your head and put you back on the road to success.

- Read it again
- Look for essential words
- Hold a mini-review
- Read it aloud
- Contact your lecturer
- Talk to other students
- Consult another text
- Try to explain to someone what it's about