



Reading Effectively

Students starting at university are often overwhelmed by the amount and type of reading they are expected to do on a regular basis. You are expected to keep up with regular weekly reading for tutorials, lectures and workshops and do extra reading while researching for assignments. The material you are required to read is often unfamiliar in content and structure and the language is sometimes very dense and complex.

You have probably already developed a number of strategies for effective reading in your experience prior to coming to university. You will need to draw on these and implement some new strategies in order to make the most of your reading at university. This guide will outline some useful strategies to help you become a more efficient and productive reader.

Establish your purpose

The most important question you can ask yourself in relation to academic reading is – why am I reading this? The way you read a particular item will depend on your purpose for reading it. You should already be familiar with this idea from your reading prior to entering university. Most people would read a street directory differently to the way they would read a novel and a dictionary differently to a magazine or newspaper. So, the purpose of your reading determines how you will read. You are not expected to read every reading on your reading list carefully from beginning to end, word for word. Skimming, scanning and careful, deliberate reading are all skills which can be applied to reading academic texts, depending on the purpose of your reading.

The structure of academic writing

Before looking at specific strategies to assist with your reading it is useful to spend some time discussing the structure of academic writing. Most of the reading you will be expected to do at university will be well structured, written in a formal academic way and will contain specific language from your discipline area. You may be expected to read chapters from a textbook, a journal article, a research report, a government website or a paper from a conference proceeding.

There are certain features that can help you to read, predict and understand the content of the reading. Most academic writing has an introductory and concluding paragraph or section. Some articles and research reports may also have an abstract. These will quickly give an overview of what the article or chapter is about.

Often individual paragraphs also have an identifiable structure with a topic sentence (often the first sentence of a paragraph) telling the reader what the paragraph will be about. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph will then develop this topic sentence with examples, explanations and further information, often leading in the final sentence into introducing the topic sentence of the next paragraph. Check the table below for further explanation of this structure.

General structure and functions of a paragraph

topic sentence/s	sets out the topic and main ideas. The topic sentence can also tell the reader what the content of the paragraph is going to be by setting out an outline of the sub-topics or issues to be discussed.
general information	elaborates the topic sentence or provides some general information relating to the topic
detailed information	integrates published evidence, quotations, or examples to support the claims made in the topic sentence/s
When interpreting information, the following function is also possible:	
summary and reinforcement	links the information in the paragraph to the overall point of view, proposition, aim or hypothesis. This last sentence/s can also signal issues or other sub-topics to be continued in the following paragraphs.

For more detail see the Academic Skills Module – Writing Paragraphs on MyUni, [Writing and Speaking at Uni](#)

Reading strategies

As mentioned above, how you read depends on why you are doing the reading.

- If reading a chapter for **background to a lecture** you might quickly skim the reading – read the introduction/conclusion; check the headings and sub headings for main ideas; read the topic sentence for each paragraph; read any bolded or italicised material; and look at any diagrams or other visuals.
- The above technique would also be useful if you are checking on the **relevance of an article for an essay**. Once you have established an overview of the main points in the article you would then go back and read more carefully any sections relevant to your assignment.
- If reading a series of relevant **articles/ chapters for an essay** you must read each slowly and carefully, making notes as you go, critiquing the reading and outlining in your own combination of words what the material is about.
- If you are looking for a **specific piece of information**, say the answer to a question for a lab report, you might use scanning. Scanning involves reading quickly to locate specific information. You use this skill when you find a number in a telephone directory. To help locate the specific term you are looking for you could use the index of a book, chapter headings or scanning quickly through the chapter. Once you locate the information you will need to read that section more carefully, perhaps taking notes.

By using these varying techniques it is possible to manage your reading much more efficiently. Establish your purpose for reading and then choose the technique that best fits that purpose.

Critical reading

It is important at university that you read material critically and analyse what you are reading in an academic way. Most of what you read will come from respected, academic sources that have been chosen by your lecturer for their importance to your understanding of the course. While you are reading (and noting your readings) it is important to constantly be aware of what the writer is saying and how he/she is saying it. Ask yourself some of the following questions while reading:

- What is the writer trying to say?
- What perspective or theoretical position (argument) is the writer taking?
- Is the writer saying similar things to others who are writing in the area or are their thoughts substantially different?
- What evidence does he/she present to support the argument?
- Is the writer coming from a biased perspective or is he/she presenting a balanced argument?
- What qualifications does the writer have for writing in this area?
- Do you agree with what the writer is suggesting? Why?
- Do you find the text challenging, not just in terms of the language and structure, but also in the ideas it presents?
- How does the writer use other experts' ideas (by reference to their work)?
- Does the writer simplify complex ideas or make simple concepts difficult to grasp?

Readings on the internet are becoming increasingly popular with lecturers and students alike. Your lecturer may refer you to an important website to do some up to date reading for your course. However, be aware that when you are researching material on the web for yourself, say for an assignment, you must be critical of what you find. You must be able to distinguish between material which has been refereed (or checked) by other academics or experts in the field and personal opinion put up on a website by someone who may not be an expert or who may be using the web as a way to further their own cause. Usually websites with gov. (indicating a government site) and edu. (indicating an educational institution) are considered reasonable to use. Many of the questions noted above will also be useful to check the validity of a website.

Dealing with difficult material

Sometimes particular readings are very difficult to read and understand. There are a number of strategies you can use to help with these readings.

- Skim the material by reading the introduction and conclusion to try to get an overview.
- Even if you don't understand every word, try to get the overall sense of what the author is trying to say.
- Look at headings and sub headings to gain some idea of the structure of the article/chapter.
- Look at the diagrams/ figures/charts to gain a better understanding of the material.
- Try to explain, using your own words, what you believe the reading is about.
- Look up any unfamiliar words in a dictionary. Some words have very specific meanings in a particular discipline area so it may be useful to find a glossary of terms or subject specific dictionary for your discipline.
- Try and find a simpler text on the same subject so that you can grasp the main concepts being discussed before you attempt to read the more difficult text again.
- Discuss the reading with other students.
- Discuss the reading with your lecturer/tutor and see if there is an easier reading they could give you to read instead.

Further resources

For more information on effective reading check the following websites:

Unilearning Online -

<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/main.html>,

University of Melbourne -

http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/llsu/resources/read_research.html

If you require more assistance with reading effectively please contact the Language and Learning Service on 8303 5771.
Visit the LLS website for additional resources: www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/lls/

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