Academic Reading

Aim of this factsheet

To provide an understanding of what academic reading is and suggest several strategies.

At University, you are required to evidence that your ideas, views and opinions are valid through the reading you have undertaken. You also need to be able to evaluate the texts you use to evidence your arguments. Therefore, your ability to research and read effectively is crucial to the success you achieve. The focus of your reading will be on the subjects you are studying and you will probably never read a complete academic book during your entire course of study. To read efficiently however, you will need to develop skills that enable you to locate relevant information quickly.

You need to engage critically with text and your tutors will expect you to:

- Understand the content and variety of texts
- Reflect upon what writers have said
- Evaluate what you have read from different sources
- Develop your own ideas
- Use reading to develop your thinking (Price & Maier, 2005)

To read critically you need to make judgements about the text and its usefulness to you.

How should you start?

A look at the printing history, which is usually located immediately after the title page, will tell you how up-to-date a book is. This will tell you when a book was first published, reprinted or a new edition released. It is important to use up-to-date books and journals to keep abreast of new developments and thinking in your subject. Journals are a particularly good source of up-to-date information. However, you need to be cautious, as ideas put forward may not be tried and tested but only speculative. You will also be reading online and you need to evaluate these sources to ensure that you use academic ones and check when websites were last updated.

Once you have found the book, journal or website you require you then need to locate the relevant sections of information quickly. You need to **skim** and **scan** the text in order to find the sections you need to read more carefully. Use the ‘find’ or ‘search’ facility to help you when working at a computer.

Skimming

When skimming through a text you should be looking at:

- titles and subtitles
- the beginning and end paragraphs of chapters
- the beginning and end sentences of paragraphs
- pictures and diagrams which summarise what the writer is saying
Scanning

When scanning you usually look for:

- particular words or phrases which you expect to find in the text
- key words, which may be in italics or bold type
- specific information which you have found from the contents or index pages but cannot be located by a single word or phrase
- the structure or organisation of the text as this can make it easier to identify main ideas. For example, scientific texts are often organised as follows: Problem, hypothesis, experiment, results and conclusions.

Critical Reading

Reading is not just a one-way process of understanding what a writer is trying to say about a subject. You need to adopt an active role by:

Questioning the text. Asking questions will help you to stay focussed on your subject and find the information you require. **Looking carefully at the evidence being presented**, particularly if it is a research paper.

For example:

- Is this an eminent person in my subject area?
- Why has the author written this book/undertaken this research?
- What is the main argument being presented?
- What evidence does the author use to support and develop this argument?
- Is the evidence presented valid? (That is: up-to-date, relevant or biased.)
- Is the author’s argument similar or different to others you have read?
- How does the author’s argument develop this particular area of study?
- Do you agree with the author? (Why?/Why not?)
- How can I use this information?

Being flexible and receptive. This means being prepared to change your views based upon the evidence presented in the text, yet being critical and able to step back and analyse it in a detached way and search for the evidence that supports the ideas or not.

Finding author agreement. You can only disagree if you can spot an area for future research that may create new knowledge that will alter that agreement.

Locating author disagreement. This allows you to create an argument by weighing up the evidence each author provides and drawing your own sensible assumptions. The table below illustrates this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jones (2011)</td>
<td>What is the best temperature for learning in a classroom?</td>
<td>Educational researcher (USA) demonstrates that the best temperature is between 17 and 23 degrees for students sitting in a classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallows (2013)</td>
<td>Does Fallows (2013) agree or disagree with Jones (2011)?</td>
<td>Fallows (2013) research comes to the same conclusion as Jones (2011). (So this is an agreement with first author).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (2013)</td>
<td>Does White (2013) agree with the two above?</td>
<td>White (2013) states that clothing and external temperature should be considered. (So this disagreement builds upon the first and second authors’ works).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A word of advice - if you are taking notes always write down the full reference details so that you have them to hand when you write your citations, bibliography or reference list. Use Refzone and follow the university policy on referencing.

If you copy any text word for word, always note the page number and highlight your notes. This will alert you to either quote or paraphrase when you use it.
If you use websites, make sure that the reference you provided takes the reader exactly to the webpage containing the information you are using.

**Reading for remembering**

To remember and read effectively you need to ensure that you understand the main points of the text you are reading. The **SQ3R** method of reading ensures that you read for comprehension.

**SQ3R** stands for: **Survey**, **Question**, **Read**, **Recall** and **Review**.

This method can help you when preparing for exams as it combines memory development and skill acquisition at the same time.

**Survey** – A quick skim of the book or journal to give you a general idea of what the text is about. Look at chapter titles, sub-headings, pictures, diagrams, charts, graphs, introductory paragraphs of chapters and conclusions.

**Question** – Asking questions will help you to stay focused on your subject.
- What does this text tell me about X?
- What evidence does it provide for this view?
- How does this fit with my earlier findings?
- Does this support my views or not?

If after these two steps you feel that the text is of no use to you move on to another text. If you feel that it is useful, continue with the next three steps.

**Read** – Read the text in detail to answer the question you have set. Try to remain focused on your reason for reading the text. Pick out keywords and signpost words such as 'therefore', 'nevertheless', 'furthermore' and 'alternatively'. Reduce your reading speed for difficult passages. Reread any passages that are unclear to you. Make notes on key points. Do not try to read too much in one go.

**Recall** – Recall the information you have read by either speaking it aloud or by writing it in your own words. Note any points you feel uncertain about. The suggested recall period is every 20 minutes.

**Review** – Check what you have recalled with the actual text to ensure that you are accurate. This method engages you in processing the text and not just reading on autopilot, which does little to aid your retention of the material.

**Speed reading techniques**

It is useful to understand how you read. Do you read each word as an individual unit or do you read a cluster of words in a single fixation (look).

A reader who reads each word separately is reading slowly and not very efficiently. As the brain is absorbing information slowly and separately this can hinder understanding.

A reader who is more efficient has fewer fixations and reads a cluster of words together. The brain is able to make sense of the information more quickly and this aids understanding.

You will probably have developed the fast reading skills to some extent and exercises practiced regularly can increase your reading speed. Two techniques are ‘eye gymnastics’ and ‘finger tracing’.
**Eye gymnastics**

In eye gymnastics, you train yourself to read clusters of words with fewer fixations on the text. You focus your eyes on the central cluster and this forces you to develop your peripheral vision. (See McMillan & Weyers for exercises.)

**Finger tracing**

Finger tracing involves reading a line of text following your finger from left to right in a single movement. This focuses you on the line you are reading and stops you from skipping forwards or re-reading what you have already read. It helps you to make sense of the text and increases your eye speed as you move your finger faster. (See McMillan and Weyers for exercises)

Be aware of things that can slow your reading down:

- Reading each word separately
- Sub-vocalisation (sounding out each word in your head)
- Distractions such as noise, clutter etc
- Poor eyesight
- Poor lighting
- Being cold
- Over tiredness

**Dyslexia**

If you are having difficulty with your reading, for example, if you find text moves about on a page then you may have dyslexia. Please contact the Student Enabling Centre and someone will investigate this further and may suggest that you have a test to confirm whether you have Dyslexia or not.

**References and further reading**


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**For an appointment or further advice:**

**Click:** [http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/AcademicSkills](http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/AcademicSkills)

**Call:** 01785 353500

**Email:** academicskills@staffs.ac.uk

**Visit:** Skills Space, Thompson Library, Stoke / Blackheath Lane, Stafford / Shrewsbury Hospital

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