



## READING SKILLS

### Use this sheet to help you:

- develop 10 strategies to improve your reading

### 5 minute self test

What do you find difficult about reading at university? Tick the boxes below:

- Finding enough time and energy
- Maintaining concentration
- Improving speed
- Managing vocabulary
- Selecting what to focus on in texts
- Understanding new, theoretical or detailed information
- Identifying main points and arguments
- Evaluating evidence
- Identifying similarities and differences between texts
- Reading texts that assume background knowledge & experience
- Reading different types of text (case studies, reports, literature reviews etc.)

**Read on for advice on addressing these difficulties.**

## Introduction

The reading demands of university study are not easy. Unfortunately, however, it is all too common for students to pay little attention to their own approaches to reading, that is, how they read, and how they can improve the effectiveness and speed of their reading.

This Helpsheet provides extensive reading advice. Furthermore, the Helpsheet provides reading tips that are specific for particular text types and for the purposes you may have.

Before you read this advice, you may find it worth reflecting on the nature of the reading that you conduct at university. This may help you consider which of the following tips might be particularly useful. The following section may help you do this.

### **What you read at university**

You may be expected to read a wide range of texts that include the course reading pack, lecture slides, books, journal articles, internet articles, newspapers, research reports, literature reviews, case studies and strategic plans.

### **Why you read at university**

You may read to: prepare for lectures and tutorials, review information addressed in lectures and tutorials, conduct research for assignments, or revise for exams.

### **What reading abilities you need**

Beyond being able to simply understand texts, you will need to critique them, evaluate them, compare and contrast them, and apply the information you find useful from them.

## Effective reading: general advice

The following advice may seem obvious, but is important.

- Consider where you read. Always read in a well-lit and quiet place that is free of distractions, and don't get into the habit of reading uni materials in bed! (unless you want to go to sleep).
- Don't vocalise as you read. This will slow you down, it won't help concentration, and it will lead to bad reading approaches.
- Read at times when you can concentrate, and maintain concentration by taking regular short breaks, perhaps every 30 or 45 minutes.
- Set yourself reading tasks (10 pages, 1 chapter, 1 section of a chapter etc).
- Remember that reading often takes longer than you expect and you often need to go beyond set texts. Give yourself enough time!

## Reading strategy 1: purposeful reading

If you tend to begin reading like this: *"I need to read Chapter 6 – here goes! ..."*, you may need to rethink your approach. Specifically, you will need to create a purpose for reading. You can create this purpose if you:

### Refer to:

- assessment tasks
- lecture slides
- tutorial questions
- textbook questions

### Create:

- questions based on lectures or tutorials
- questions based on a skim of the text
- contents, headings, subheadings, diagrams, introductions, etc

### Consider:

- what you already know
- related knowledge or experiences

Be very clear about exactly what you are looking for. Don't just read aimlessly. Perhaps you will look for answers to questions, general understanding of a topic or issue, detailed knowledge, a range of perspectives, identification of a writer's position, evaluation of a writer's position, arguments that support your position, arguments that oppose your position, examples, statistics, definitions, explanations, quotes, etc. Try to have the purpose in writing nearby so you maintain focus.

Purposeful reading of this nature can help you read faster and more selectively. It can also help your concentration and your ability to remember.

## Reading strategy 2: scanning

Scanning is reading quickly to search for specific information. You may not realise it, but you are already good at scanning. You scan, for example, when checking a TV guide or a phone book. Scanning may allow you to 'read' up to 1,500 words a minute.

One reason to scan an academic text that you have found while researching is to locate key terms as a means to assess the text's relevance.

## Reading strategy 3: skimming

Skimming is reading quickly to gain a general idea. Skimming may allow you to 'read' up to 1000 words a minute.

Skimming helps you identify whether or not to continue reading, what to read carefully, and where the best place is to begin. Skimming an academic text immediately before you read it carefully can help you consider what you already know and can help you develop a purpose for reading. An initial skim can also help maximise your interest in the text and your understanding and reflection on the material.

As with scanning, skimming does not involve reading every word. Instead, you may skim by reading:

- titles
- subheadings
- words in that are in **bold**, in *italics* or underlined
- diagrams
- a report's abstract, introduction or conclusion
- the first sentence of every paragraph
- chapter questions
- chapter objectives
- chapter summaries

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## Reading strategy 4: information words

There will be times when you need to do more than skim a text in the way described above, but still need to read quickly. This may require ability to conduct "surface reading".

It is worth remembering that no more than 50% of the words in an average textbook are "information" words. The other words are like glue and paint: they are there to provide connections and add interest, but are not essential for meaning. If you concentrate on information words, you can read faster and with better comprehension.

But, how do you learn to pick out the important information words? A large part of the trick involves paying attention to what the author is trying to say. Look for the message, and the information words will emerge naturally.

**Activity: Read the following four paragraphs and see if you can get a sense of the general meaning by only reading the information words that are featured.**

1. Some advertisements \_\_\_\_\_ undesirable effects \_\_\_\_\_. One form \_\_\_\_\_ advertising suggests \_\_\_\_\_ buying \_\_\_\_\_ brings happiness. \_\_\_\_\_ more \_\_\_\_\_ happier \_\_\_\_\_ feel. Parents in particular \_\_\_\_\_ under pressure \_\_\_\_\_ this form \_\_\_\_\_. Advertisements \_\_\_\_\_ expensive toys \_\_\_\_\_ imply \_\_\_\_\_ greater pleasure than lower priced \_\_\_\_\_.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ example \_\_\_\_\_ children \_\_\_\_ happier \_\_\_\_\_ video game than \_\_\_\_\_ Scrabble. \_\_\_\_\_ not true. \_\_\_\_\_ opposite \_\_\_\_\_ more likely. Advertisements \_\_\_\_\_ make \_\_\_\_\_ people \_\_\_\_\_ more discontented.

3. Another form \_\_\_\_\_ undesirable advertising \_\_\_\_\_ associates \_\_\_\_\_ products \_\_\_\_\_ success. \_\_\_\_\_ example \_\_\_\_\_ washing powder \_\_\_\_\_ linked \_\_\_\_\_ promotion \_\_\_\_ work, or \_\_\_\_\_ toothpaste.

4. \_\_\_\_\_ success \_\_\_\_\_ attracting \_\_\_\_\_ boyfriend \_\_\_\_ girlfriend. \_\_\_\_\_ effect \_\_\_\_\_ these advertisements \_\_\_\_\_ encourage \_\_\_\_\_ false idea \_\_\_\_\_ success. Genuine success \_\_\_\_\_ earned \_\_\_\_\_ effort: \_\_\_\_\_ not \_\_\_\_\_ money.

Source: ELBC (Academic Communication Skills) Booklet (1994)

## Reading strategy 5: phrase reading

Watch the eyes of a friend or a member of your family while he or she is reading. You will see that they move along each line of print in a series of jerks. The pauses between the jerks are known as fixations. It is during the fixations that your eyes take in words.

Poor readers take in only one or two words in each fixation.

| This is | how a | poor | reader's | eyes move | along | lines | of print. |

A good reader, on the other hand, takes in several words in each fixation

| This is how | a better reader's | eyes move along | lines of print. |

Source: ELBC (Academic Communication Skills) Booklet (1994)

**Activity: Read the two sentences below, focusing only on the highlighted words**

Today it is more important than ever to be able to read fluently. For example, if you are a car-driver you have to be able to read a great many road signs.

What are the two sentences mainly about? reading, writing or travelling

Which word completes the first sentence? ...to read ... slowly, fast, or fluently

Which example of writing is mentioned in the second sentence? application forms, road signs or advertisements

Nouns and verbs are the key words you need to focus on

Source: ELBC (Academic Communication Skills) Booklet (1994)

**Activity: Quickly “surface read” the two paragraphs below, paying attention only to the nouns and verbs. Can you get the basic meaning of the paragraphs just from this quick read?**

Solar energy is released by atomic reactions in the sun. Solar cells can capture sunlight and convert it to electrical energy. One of the latest ideas is to send huge collecting panels into orbit around the earth. There, in perpetual sunlight, they could capture light energy, and convey it to antennae on the earth's surface. It could then be converted into electricity.

One of man's oldest source of power, water, has the additional advantages of being reusable and clean. The energy of water as it rushes downhill in pipes, gives hydroelectric schemes the power to turn their turnings and produce electricity. Wave power is another method for using the energy of water to drive generators for producing electricity. Tidal energy makes use of the ebb and flow of tides in partially enclosed basins, such as the Bay of Fundy, in Canada, which has a tidal range of 16 metres!

## Reading strategy 6: analytical reading

Analytical reading (or study reading) is needed when you want to make sure that you fully grasp and appreciate what you are reading. You may have to read statements more than once, stop to think about them, or jot down key words when using this style. As a result, your reading rate can easily drop to below 100 words a minute.

**Activity: Read the following for an example of when slow, careful reading may be needed.**

One of the first things that should be done in the evaluation of structural equation models is an assessment of the adequacy of input data and the statistical assumption underlying any estimation methods used in the analysis. (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988, p. 76)

Is there an easy way to read analytically? No. It can take great time and effort.

## Reading strategy 7: marking the text

If the text you are reading is your own copy, you could also underline key words, highlight with a marker, or make notes in margins, or alternatively, if you don't own the text, you could use 'post-it' labels.

This process of marking texts can help you concentrate (and keep reading!) and can help you identify key points and make the book easier to survey later when you need to use it again for your assignment or to revise for an exam.

## Reading strategy 8: note-taking

If you don't take notes well, or don't take them at all, now is the time to develop this essential skill! Note-taking can help you gain deeper understanding and reflection, a better ability to remember and good exam preparation materials for later.

When taking notes, pay keep in mind the following 7 principles:

## **1. Record publication details**

Always note publication details of any text you may use. Specifically, record such things as the title, author, date, publisher, place of publication, URL, and page numbers.

## **2. Preview the text before you take notes**

As mentioned earlier, scan, skim and 'surface read' the text before noting to help you develop understanding of the text and awareness of what is important to note. Taking notes of everything is a slow, boring, ineffective exercise.

## **3. Maintain a central place for your notes.**

Where to record your notes is up to you. Some people prefer using a computer, while others use flash cards, folders, or exercise books. What is important is that you will be able to find the notes and understand their layout and content a few weeks or months later.

## **4. Paraphrase and summarise ideas**

Writing out sentences word for word is probably even less useful than just highlighting sentences with a marker. Sure, they will be times you need write things word for word (use quotation marks when you do this!) but better understanding will come through putting things in your own words. Not sure how to do this? Say the key points in your own words out loud and then write them down. Finish by checking your paraphrase is clear and accurate.

## **5. Note your thoughts**

Don't forget the great value of noting beyond just what is said in the text. Note down such things as your ideas, points you agree or disagree with, relevant experiences, questions, examples, and relationships with other texts. Those initial thoughts you have as you read may be of use later, and it is a mistake to risk forgetting them.

## **6. Be creative**

Consider how you should note different parts of texts as well as just what you should note. The process of thinking about how to note can aid understanding as well as ability to remember information and reflect. Depending on the nature of the information you wish to note, you may choose to use spider diagrams, concept maps, titles, columns, dot points, numbers, symbols, colours, pictures or columns for your reflections.

## **7. Review your notes**

Once you have completed some notes, always look back at them and check: 1. they are accurate, 2. they are readable, 3. you will be able to use them later and 4. they contain full reference details.



## Reading strategy 9: managing vocabulary

Even if you are a native English speaker, you may at times feel overwhelmed by the amount of unfamiliar vocabulary you encounter. Of course, as a university student, you have a great opportunity and need to build your vocabulary (discipline specific and general), so consult glossaries and use a dictionary. Keep a list of new words: record their definitions and write example sentences which show meaning and usage.

When using your dictionary, be discerning. Know which words can be ignored, and see if it is possible to guess the meanings of words. You may be able do this if you:

### 1. Guess using context:

The patient suffered from respiratory ailments, skin problems, anacritis, and hypertension

What could anacritis mean? (NB. Not a real word!)

### 2. Guess using prefixes, suffixes and word stems

- *Antichocoflavourism*
- *Aquaengineacousticology*

What could these words mean? (NB. Not real words!)

## Reading strategy 10: reading with others

Consider getting a “study buddy” or study group. Be careful to keep focussed on what you need to do and you may find that by sharing notes, explaining, asking and quizzing each other, you can increase you ability to understand, reflect upon and remember key points in texts.

## Finally

If you continue to find reading difficult, remember this:

*Reading at university level is difficult!*

*However, if you put in the time and effort you may start to enjoy the challenge!*

## References

*ELBC (Academic Communication Skills) Booklet* (1994) Adelaide, Australia: Technical and Further Education