

Reading effectively

This study guide aims to help you understand why reading is essential to studying and gives some ideas about how to read effectively.

Related guides: '[Academic Literature](#)' and '[Effective Note Making](#)'.

Reading

Reading is central to academic study and is part of the learning process. It will play a part in preparing to write an assignment, to attend a lecture or participate in a seminar, deciding on a research topic or revising for your exams. However, it is different to the kinds of reading that take place at previous stages of education or in daily life, and the amount of reading you feel you are expected to do can seem overwhelming.

It will help if you remember: **academic reading is not necessarily about reading every word of a book, or about reading a book from cover to cover.** Nor is it about speed-reading while absorbing everything the book contains. **Effective reading is not about speed, but selectivity.**

In assessed writing, lecturers will want to know:

- that you have read widely;
- that you can find and select useful material independently, to answer your question;
- that you have understood the key issues and debates;
- that you can critically evaluate the ideas and theories relevant to your topic;
- that you can synthesise ideas from research you have read and produce your own ideas, informed by your reading.

What are you reading for?

Your purpose in reading needs to be established, as there are different ways to read, depending on what you need to achieve from your reading. You may have to read a text more than once, in order to achieve different aims from your reading (though you may not have to read a whole text in depth more than once).

Academic reading is rarely just fact-finding. This might be the major difference between reading at University and at previous stages of education. Relying on a single course textbook is no longer enough. Textbooks may be too general, oversimplified, out of date

or unrepresentative of the research area they are based on. They are general introductions, not original research, and you should always try to go back to the primary sources they cite rather than relying on their second-hand account of research. The more references you can find, the more convincing your point will be. Be alert when reading around your subject for the different views of authors. Differences and alternatives in the texts might help you understand something better, or realise that an issue is not as simple as you first thought. Read critically, and assess the quality of the information you find.

Reading to find out if a text is useful

This kind of reading can be done very quickly. You do not need to read the whole book or article to find out whether it will be relevant to your task. You can use this technique:

- Establish some key words that are central to your assignment question or the issues it deals with;
- Use these to compile a list of texts that look as if they would be relevant. You could use the library catalogue, electronic databases (see the library website), and your course reading list;
- Once you have located the texts, **briefly** skim through the clues offered by the book itself to see if your keywords are mentioned:
 - Title (including any sub-titles)
 - Publisher's description or 'blurb' on the back of the book
 - List of contents/chapter titles
 - Any sub-headings in the article or book chapters
 - Preface or introduction
 - Journal abstract
 - Index of keywords at the back of the book
 - Conclusion
 - Date of publication (how up-to-date is the text?)

Reading to find useful material in a text

In addition to the index (if there is one), you can use the technique of **scanning** to quickly assess whether a text or part of a text has any relevance to your assignment. Scanning is a very fast, superficial look at a page to see if it contains one of your keywords, much as you would glance at a dictionary or phone directory to locate something you need. Scanning involves running the eye quickly down the page without actually taking in the meaning, just being alert for the information you want. Once you have found it, you can note down the page number or use a post-it note in the book, so that you can return to it later for a more intensive reading. You will need to return to that part of the text in more detail later to understand the context and judge the quality of the information you have found.

Reading to get the main ideas of a text

Skimming is also a faster form of reading than intensive, word-for word reading. You use it to gain an overview of a text, or part of a text, and to pick up the structure and main

ideas without getting too involved with the individual details. Skimming involves running the eye quickly along the lines, paying attention to the first and last lines of each paragraph to get an idea of the topic, and any 'signpost' words that indicate the direction of the text's argument, such as '*however*', '*furthermore*', '*for example*'. You will not have to read every word of every text you read in depth. Reading in too much detail can sometimes not only slow you down but make you lose sight of the text's whole argument and of your purpose in reading it. Much of what you read can be skim-read, except those parts you select as particularly relevant, or worth discussing or quoting in detail in your assignment. You can always go back and read in more detail if you feel it is necessary. The more you practice skim-reading, the faster you will become.

Reading for background and general information

You might want to explore a topic further to find a research project that interests you, or to gain a wider understanding of the issues and debates before you start an assignment. In this case, a combination of the techniques outlined above might be useful, with brief notes as to where you found information that caught your attention, so that you can locate it again and return to it later in more detail. Also note why it caught your attention and the purpose you might put it to when you come to write your assignment. You could use post-it notes, keep a reading log in a notebook or on index cards, or use highlighting/underlining and comments in the margin if you own the book or article.

Reading intensively

An intensive reading most resembles what we usually think of as reading. However, to turn your reading into learning, your reading must be active, not passive. You may find this technique useful if you have to write a review, critique or evaluation of an article or book, or if the text is a central one that you will draw on heavily for an assignment. To engage actively with the text you are reading, it helps to make detailed notes, as a way of thinking about the text and recording your thoughts – not just 'what the text says'.

To begin with, you could make an outline of the structure of the text and its arguments, much like one of your essay plans, but in reverse. Use the parts of the essay, the introduction, paragraph topic sentences and conclusion, and the 'signpost' words to reconstruct the structure. Complete this stage before going back to tackle difficult passages – you may find that now you know their context in the argument, they are easier to understand, or that they are not so central to the argument after all. Note the author's purpose in writing the article and how it relates to the information you need. You can also summarise the key points in your own words, noting why they are important in the argument and why they will be useful for your assignment. Do not simply copy large portions of the text; this will not help you understand it. Copy out only those sentences you actually intend to quote verbatim in your assignment, and do this only *after* you have read the whole article, noted potentially useful passages and are sure that the quotation will be useful and relevant.

Using this technique, you will follow the argument of the book or article, and be able to judge the quality of the evidence, analysis and conclusions, rather than simply extracting information or reading without engaging with the material. For further information, see the

study guides on note-taking and on *Reading Critically*. Remember that although this technique is more time-consuming than others, you will not use it for all the texts you read.

Reading to remember or revise

Reading will play a role in revising for exams, but simply reading will not help you to assimilate and remember information. To retain what you read, you need to read actively, and make detailed, organised notes. This process will be similar to the technique for intensive reading, although your focus will be different as you may be less interested in the author's argument, unless it offers a theoretical model for your subject that you need to be very familiar with. Again, this does not involve passively copying out large sections of the text word-for-word, but actively putting it into your own words and organisation (whether you prefer linear notes or 'mind-mapping'). You could summarise the key elements of the text, and then try:

- reducing your notes even further without the text in front of you;
- filling out these summaries again with detail from memory;
- reproducing your notes without looking at the notes or the text.

Recording your reading

Whatever you read, make sure you note the information necessary to reference it accurately. Write down page numbers for references and quotations and:

- **For a book:** the author's full name(s) or those of the editor(s), the full title (including any subtitle), any series title (if the book is part of a numbered series), the edition (if more than one), the place of publication and publisher
- **For an article or chapter in an edited collection:** add the name(s) of the article or chapter author, the title of the article or chapter, and the page extent (first and last page number).
- **For a journal article:** the author, article title, journal title, volume number, date, and page extent.

Further guidance on how to present this information is provided in the Study Guide *Referencing*.

Reading in order

Some suggestions to ensure that you read the most relevant things first:

- The most recent publications. They will represent the most up-to-date research and may summarise previous research for you.
- Literature reviews. They summarise previous or recent research and give you a good overview of what research exists and what it says.
- Student-oriented texts, such as textbooks and subject specialist reference works (dictionaries, encyclopaedias, etc.). These will orientate you in the topic, but should not be relied on too heavily.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in the **Student Support Service**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- 💻 Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
- 🖱️ Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our [website](#).

Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.

	<p>Scan the QR-code with a smartphone app for more resources.</p>	
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