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How to read effectively

In The why, when, and what of reading PDF (382 kB) we mentioned that reading for academic purposes is different to other types of reading. You don't have to linger over the words like you might with a work of fiction, but you don't have to rush through either. You may also read differently depending on your purpose – if you are reading for general background information you may read more quickly and generally than you would read when looking for information about a specific topic for an essay.

Effective reading strategies will ensure you read efficiently. It's a 3-step process:

PRE-READING → **READING** → **POST-READING**

Pre-reading

The pre-reading stage is about getting familiar with the text and setting out any goals. There are three methods you can use while pre-reading: survey, skim, and scan. Ask yourself "why am I reading this?" and let that guide whether you survey, skim, or scan the text, or do all three.

survey
- general overview
- look at title, author, date
- contents, indexes
- introduction and conclusion
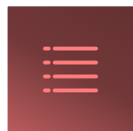
skim
- note the outline of the argument
- look at chapter titles and section headings

scan
- find the most relevant sections
- look for keywords or phrases
- use 'Find' on electronic texts

Survey

A survey gives you a general overview of the work. Take a sweeping look at the introduction, conclusion, and any contents or indices. Note the title, the author, and the publication details (record these right away in the necessary citation style, just so you have it). You might ask yourself:

→ What is the text about?
→ Who wrote it, and why?
→ How recent is it?
→ Is it useful for my purpose?

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Skim

Skimming the work helps you get an idea of the outline of the argument. Do this by looking at chapter titles or section headings. This helps you figure out where the information you need most might be located.

After a survey and/or skim read, you might decide that the book or article isn't relevant to your purpose after all. That's fine. Cross it off your list and move on to the next item. You've saved a lot more time than you would have if you had read the whole thing before realising it wasn't useful.

Scan

Scanning the text helps you determine which of the sections are most relevant to your topic or purpose. Do this by looking for specific keywords or phrases in chapter titles, section headings, or paragraphs themselves. With electronic texts you can search for particular words by using ctrl + f (or command + f when using a Mac). What's relevant depends on why you are reading – if you are getting background information before a lecture then you may need to read the whole text, but if you are answering a pre-tutorial question you might need to find just one bit of information.

Remember, you don't have to read the whole book or the whole article if you're looking for something specific. Pre-reading will help you work out which parts you need to read. However, be alert – if you can't find what you're looking for, or you can't follow the logic of the text or the author's argument, you may need to pause and take the time to read more thoroughly.

Reading

Whoohoo, this is the bit everyone knows how to do, right? Read away!

Not so fast. Have you ever found yourself reading the same sentence over and over, unable to figure out what it means? Have you ever felt your eyes glaze over as you read yet another unfamiliar word? To combat these inefficiencies you need to be an effective reader.

Effective readers are selective, active, and critical.

Selective reading means you read only the parts that are particularly relevant to your purpose. That's right, you don't always have to read every single word, especially if your eyes are glazing over. If you've done your pre-reading, then you should be able to find the information you need pretty quickly. If not, take another scan of the text and look for keywords relating to your topic (remember you can use the search function to search electronic text quickly and easily). Not sure what you're looking for? Go back to *why* you are reading what you're reading. Is it for a lecture, tutorial, or assignment? Is there a question you need to answer, or a concept you need to understand? Let this be your guide.

Active reading means doing something with the text, either physically or intellectually. The physical options include highlighting, underlining, or writing notes in the margin, but ONLY – we can't stress this enough – ONLY if the book belongs to you or you've printed the article out. Do not ever write in or on someone else's book, especially a library book! If it's not yours, don't worry, you can still be an active reader – you just need to make notes on another piece of paper or on your device, and/or think over issues in your mind.

Being active intellectually might include:

→ asking questions in response to things you read
→ practising paraphrasing ideas or passages from the text
→ writing summaries of the key points
→ looking up unfamiliar words or phrases
→ practising critical thinking.

Remember, if you make any notes on an electronic textbook you should download or save those notes to your own computer or USB storage, as you won't always have access to the online version.

Critical reading means using your critical thinking skills (PDF) on the text you are reading. Some of the things you might think about include:

→ the writer's purpose (are they trying to persuade you of something?)
→ the writer's stance and any biases
→ the language the writer is using to make their case
→ the evidence being cited
→ how what you're reading fits with or challenges your own views and ideas.

It's OK to **read the text through more than once**. Some people find it particularly useful to read the first time without highlighting or taking notes, just so they get a sense of the overall text and main ideas. This can help you identify the most relevant parts so that you read selectively the second time through. The second reading is when you really get into the swing of things by making notes, being active, and reading critically.

<h2 style="text-align:center;color:#9e2a2b;">Post-reading</h2>

You've finished reading! Yay! Now what?

Well, you might want to read it again. Sometimes the first read-through helps you get a general sense of the topic, and then the second read-through is where you really get to grips with the main ideas and work your effective reading magic. What you do next depends, as always, on why you're reading, but here are some options for general reading:

→ Test your memory and write down all the main ideas you remember from the text
→ Read over your notes and double-check you understand all the key concepts
→ Draw a mind map of the main ideas and how they relate to each other
→ Note any gaps in your knowledge for further reading, or things to ask your lecturer or tutor about
→ Answer any pre-class questions or complete assigned activities relating to the reading

When you're reading for research for an assignment, do the following:

→ Check you have accurate details and write the citation in the correct style for your bibliography or reference list. Practise writing the in-text citation as well.
→ Consider how the reading fits in with your other research. Does it offer a very different view, or does it support the other things you have read? Perhaps draw a mind map of the main ideas of what you have read.
→ Think about the authority of the writer and their level of objectivity. Consider the originality of the work compared with others you have read. Think about the accuracy and currency of the source and how you might use it in your work. Use the APPEAL criteria to help you.
→ Look over the bibliography or reference list if there is one. What sources did the author use? Are any on your unit reading list (a sign that you really need to look at them)? Have you read any of these already? Which ones will you follow up on? Add these to your personal reading list (see our Organising your reading PDF).

Extra tips, or things to try when you get stuck

It's OK not to understand everything you read. We read so that we can learn new things, after all. Also, not every text you read will be written in a way you immediately respond to. Some texts will be aimed at students studying at a higher level, or will assume the reader is an expert on the topic, while you're a novice. Don't stress. When you get stuck, try some of the tips outlined below.

Difficulty following the argument

Eyes glazing over? No idea what the author is trying to say? You need to work out the **controlling idea**, which is the main reason why the writer is writing. The controlling idea is similar to your thesis statement when writing an essay (see our Essay Structure PDF for more information). There might be one controlling idea, or there might be more. Go back to your pre-reading strategies and look at the title, any headings, the abstract and/or the introduction to help you define the controlling idea. Try to write this out in your own words on a separate piece of paper.

The **main ideas** of the text support the controlling ideas. The main ideas will often, but not always, be stated in the topic sentence or first sentence of a paragraph. They may be contained in section headings. Highlight main ideas in a particular colour or write them in your own words as dot points on a sheet of paper.

Once you have identified the controlling idea/s and the main ideas you can start to look at how these relate to each other, and the supporting ideas and information that the writer includes to strengthen these. Look for connecting words and phrases that link or contrast ideas (see the 'connecting words and phrases' section in our sentence structure PDF).

Difficulty with complex sentences

Some writers just like to write long sentences, it's true. But with patience, you can work out what they're trying to say. For background information on sentence structure, check out our PDF on sentence structure.

Start by reading slowly and read the sentence more than once. Try reading it aloud as well. The punctuation can help you figure out the pauses, and breaks the sentence into smaller chunks.

Identify the main clause and then the supporting clauses. See if you can find all the verbs (the doing words), and then find the subject of each verb, and the object/s. See our Grammar PDF for more information.
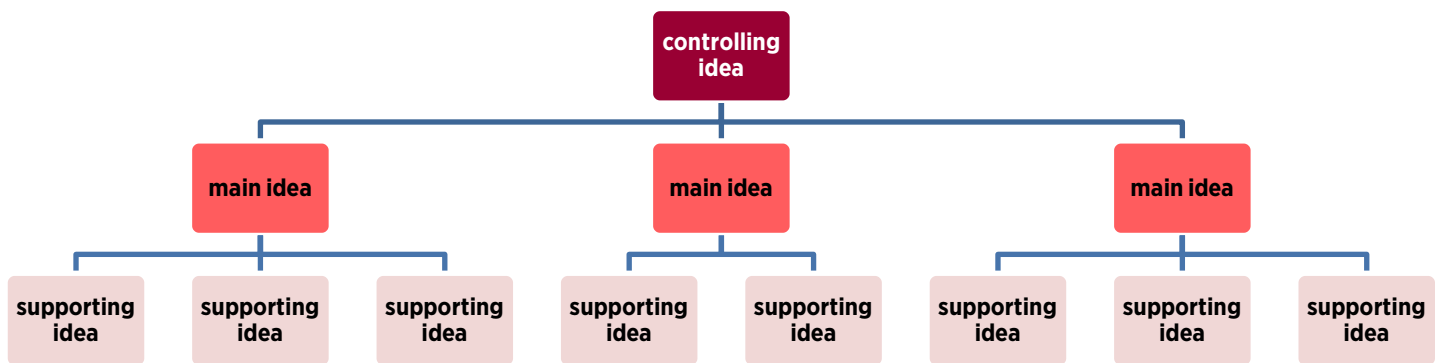
Difficulty with new vocabulary

When you come across an unfamiliar word or phrase, the best thing to do first is to try to work out the meaning from context alone. Then have a look at the word itself and see if it looks like any other word you know. Does it have a prefix like 'pre-' or 'anti-' (meaning 'before' and 'against', respectively)? Does it have a suffix like -able or -ology (meaning 'capable' and 'the study of', respectively)? You might not know what 'ontology' means at first sight, but you can at least work out that it's a study of something, even if you don't know what that something is. The rest of the sentence or paragraph might help you figure out that ontology is the philosophical study of existence OR a system of naming with particular application in information science. Context will tell you which one applies.

It's great to look things up in the dictionary, and we encourage you to do so. But try not to turn to the dictionary first and instead take the time to see if you can work out the meaning yourself, and then use the dictionary to confirm your understanding. This will help your brain remember the word and its meaning, and make a new connection. Also, if there are many words that are new to you in a text, you might spend all your time checking the dictionary instead of reading. Many textbooks include a glossary at the back and that might be a more suitable place to look up new words, especially if they have a special meaning particular to that text. Start your own glossary as well, and write down every new word or phrase and its meaning in your own words. For scientific concepts you can use Hyper Collocation to see how other writers use the word or phrase.

The final step to learning new vocabulary is to put it into practice and try it for yourself. Write a sentence using the word and cement it in your memory, or create some flashcards and quiz yourself regularly.

See also:

→ Western Sydney U Library YouTube channel
→ Palgrave Study Skills: Reading and Research Strategies

References

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