



Getting the most from your academic reading

- [Reading at university](#)
- [Reading effectively](#)
- [Useful strategies for reading](#)
- [Reading critically](#)
- [Dealing with difficult texts](#)

Reading at university

Much of your learning at university will be achieved through reading. The material covered in lectures and other classes provides a framework that you will build on through your reading. In some courses you will be expected to focus on the set textbook, in others you will be expected to read widely from your textbook, program materials, journal articles, online sources, chapters in books, newspapers and company reports. Some of your reading will be specified by your lecturer and some you will choose. The lecturer will indicate the specific expectations for each course and you need to be clear about the expected amount and range of reading for each course. The expected level of reading of texts will be closely linked to your assessment.

What and how much you read will depend on the learning or assessment tasks. In other words the purpose of your reading will determine the *selection* and *extent* of your reading. Common purposes for reading might be to:

- obtain an overview of the text in preparation for a lecture
- gain detailed understanding of the text to prepare for an exam
- find an answer to a specific question or problem for a tutorial
- gather information for an assignment or tutorial.

You will decide how much to read on any topic by considering things like the amount of detail you need, the word length of an assignment, the depth of questions on previous exam papers and the time you have available.

[top^](#)

Reading effectively

How you go about any reading is largely determined by your purpose, but the content, structure and familiarity of the text also influence the way you read. When you read texts at university you will draw on the reading skills you already have. Consider, for example, the way you scan an unfamiliar magazine, select sections of a newspaper, follow a recipe, engage with a detective novel or locate information in a telephone directory. You would read a novel in a different way than you would read a telephone directory to find a particular number.

In each case the approach you take is linked to the knowledge you already have of both the content and the way these texts are structured. This familiarity with the content and different structures of these texts gives you the confidence to choose the way you read them. You will gradually develop the same familiarity with both the content and the structure of academic texts in your course areas and choose the appropriate strategies for reading different academic texts.

[top^](#)

Useful strategies for reading

To gain an overview

It is useful to read your text before attending a lecture so that you have an overview of the topic and are prepared for the content to be covered by the lecturer. This preparation is usually based on your set textbook. For an overview it will not be necessary to read the whole chapter. However, it will be useful for you to use your knowledge of the text

structure to locate relevant content. This will allow you to identify what you already know and what is still unfamiliar. In this process you will make use of features like the title of the text, headings, introduction and summary, objectives, glossaries, tables and diagrams, use of different fonts and colour, review questions.

To prepare for discussion

In preparing for a tutorial you may need to read a set journal article. The purpose of this reading will be to gain more than an overview. You will be expected to pick out the main points or ideas so that you can feel confident about discussing them in the tutorial. With this kind of reading it is useful to begin by thinking about the title. What does it allow you to predict about the article? Does it give you any clues as to the views the author holds about this topic? What other views might be possible? You will then read the text in more detail. Read the abstract if there is one; read the introduction and conclusion or summary; read the first paragraph in each section; read the first and last sentence of each paragraph. This should give you a sound understanding of the article.

Reading to find specific information

When you are looking for the answer to a specific question or problem you will use your skills for locating information. This will enable you to locate the relevant sections and read as much as you need to find the answer to your question.

Reading for assignments

When you are reading for an assignment you will be reading a number of articles of your own choice. The first decision you make is related to the value of the text for your purpose. Who wrote it? When was it written? For whom was it written? Why was it written? How relevant is it to your assignment? Before you begin reading for an assignment you will probably have topic headings or questions that have emerged from your assignment plan. You can then use the strategies in the previous paragraph to find information relevant to that topic heading or the answer to that question.

Reading for exams

When reading to prepare for an examination you need to consider again how much and to what depth you need to read. Once you are clear about your purpose you can select appropriate strategies. Some sections you may need to read in detail.

[top^](#)

Reading critically

As you read academic texts at university you are expected to be 'critical' and to think about the author's intention and the evidence and ideas used to convince the reader. You do not necessarily accept everything you read, but actively ask questions like:

- what credibility does the author have in this field?
- what is significant or important about this text?
- what claims are being made? what is the basis of the claims? what evidence is used?
- how logical are the ideas? do the conclusions follow from the evidence?
- how valid and generalisable are the conclusions?

[top^](#)

Dealing with difficult texts

You may find reading academic texts difficult for a number of reasons. The concepts may be complex and challenging. In this case you could find a text which explains the ideas more simply. Sometimes there are many unfamiliar terms and jargon.

Focus on the main message and use any associated diagrams or other visual aids to help you understand. Using subject dictionaries or glossaries can help you to interpret the jargon words.

Sometimes you may find it difficult to maintain concentration. To overcome a lack of concentration and to maintain your interest, be an active reader by asking questions, turning headings into questions and noting answers in your own

words. Sometimes you may feel overwhelmed by the amount of readings or the size of one reading. Use your overviewing strategies to identify the main sections so that the reading is more manageable; then select the parts you need to read in more detail.

[top^](#)

Sources

Marshall , L and Rowland, M 1999 , ' Reading'. Ch.8 in A guide to learning independently, Longman, Melbourne.
Glendinning, EH & Holmstrom, B 1992, Study reading, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[top^](#)