

Reading Skills



Dealing with reading lists

First, find out which books and papers are necessary for particular lectures, tutorials or seminars and essays. If this is not clear from your module handouts do not be afraid to ask them to direct you to the most useful texts. By doing this you will be breaking up your reading into more manageable chunks and it will seem less of an obstacle.

Generally your module guide, or lecture/tutorial handout, will specify certain readings as **ESSENTIAL**. These are the ones you really should take the time to read.

Then there may be sources under **SUGGESTED** reading. These are generally very useful and will bolster your knowledge beyond set texts. Use them for essays, seminar presentations and perhaps, revision for exams.

FURTHER reading lists can be dipped into, if you have the time, when it comes to essays. However, it is good to get into the habit of reading beyond the set texts. But again, do not worry; deciding what to read will come with practice.

Remember:

You are not expected to read everything or to read texts from cover to cover. A key goal of your degree is to train you to be **SELECTIVE** by identifying relevant material.

Planning your reading

MAKE TIME

Set aside a specific time/s in your day/week when you will read.

Pick a time when you are fresh and alert. If you are tired it will be pointless trying to read.

- Decide what you are reading for – a specific lecture, tutorial, essay or a topic for exam revision.
- Decide if you want to read alone, or with one or two friends. Sometimes it is good to read with other people and then summarise and ask each other questions. Talking about what you have read helps to implant the information into your memory and also helps you to understand it – and understanding is the important thing – you will not remember if you don't understand.

Selecting your texts

There are various things to consider when selecting material:

- Check if your lecturer has recommended specific books or papers.
- Always try to get the most up-to-date material: check the date of publication. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to review older texts in order to gain some understanding of how theoretical positions have changed.

The Selection Process involves deciding whether or not a text is useful. To do this:

- Check the title
- Date of publication
- Summary notes on back or inside cover
- Contents/chapter headings
- Index

For journal articles, also check the key words at the bottom of journal abstracts.



Once you have decided that a publication looks as if it will be relevant for you:

- Look at chapter headings
- Check the introductions, conclusions and any sub-headings (these will give you a good idea of what is being covered in the piece)
- Read the abstracts on journal articles (this is where the writer will set out his/her argument, what the paper covers, and will help you decide if the work is useful).

Reading your texts

After doing all the above you may still be feeling a little overwhelmed. Your task is now to learn how to read effectively. That is, getting what you need out of a piece of written work without overloading yourself with information that you will not need.

The first thing to do is to **SKIM** the work – read it quickly to get the general idea of what is being said.

You can then embark on a **more detailed read**. It is a good idea to ask yourself questions as you go along.

- What is the main argument? What is the author's point of view?
- What points of theory are being elaborated? Do I understand them? Do I agree with them?
- Is the author backing up her/his claims with evidence? What is that evidence?

- What information here is necessary for my essay, lecture, tutorial topic? Select the information that supports your argument for your paper or presentation.
- Does the author set out similar/opposing views?
- What are the key points in the work and does the author succeed in doing what he/she said he/she would do in the abstract?

FURTHER READING TIPS

Be aware of the references that the author uses to support or refute points of view. Look these up in the author's bibliography to add to your reading list and/or to find other books and journal articles that will help with specific essay or seminar topics.

Makes notes on the answers to your questions as you go along. At the end try to see if you can sum up what the author was addressing in a few sentences.

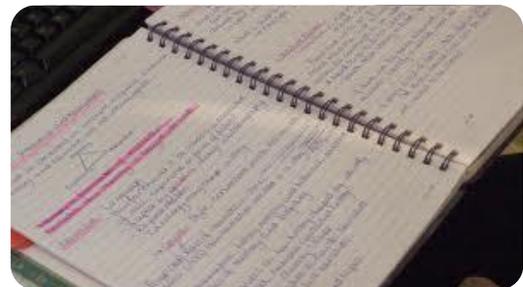
READING SPEED

The practicalities of reading and speed will differ from person to person.

If you think you are reading **too slowly** try not to worry too much. Practice to reading academic texts really does pay off. And you will be surprised how suddenly things start to make sense and you start to make the connections.

Do you reading in **manageable chunks**. 20 minutes is enough for active reading. After that take a break and then go back and do another 20 minutes. Academic reading is exacting and tiring. Don't try to do too much all at once.

Lots of academic texts can be very complex so do not worry if you have to **read a passage several times** in order to understand what is being said. If you are finding texts very complicated try finding a simpler introductory book that will ease you into your subject and its main theories.



MAKING NOTES

If you like **visual** things try making your notes as maps – joining points and theories together.

If you are more of an **audio** person you might like to record a particular paragraph and play it back at a later stage. This will help you remember certain points.

Using a **highlighter** pen (though not with library books!) is a great way to pick out important passages, words or phrases. You can use different colours for different aspects of an argument/s or different topics.