

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND LEARNING SUCCESS PROGRAM

Effective Reading and Note Making

Aim

It is important to develop effective reading skills, so you can save time by reading only relevant texts, and learn how to retain the new knowledge. We need to examine ways of making notes, so you can minimise the volume of notes you make. Making notes also helps you retain what you read because you're enlisting the help of a different part of your brain.

There are many ways to read

There are many purposes for reading, and therefore many ways to read:

1. To locate specific information, scan rapidly through a text until you find what you're looking for, e.g. reading a newspaper.
2. To understand reasons and facts and to learn, read slowly and deliberately.
3. To enjoy words and descriptions, read slowly to get the feel of the language or to picture a scene.
4. To escape into a novel, skip the dull parts and pick up enough detail to see what happens and how it ends, skimming some parts and dwelling on others.



Reading at university

At university, you'll use 1, 2 and 4 above.

- Lectures: pre-read the set material before lectures so you can understand and follow the lecturer's perspective.
- Tutorials are often based on a set of readings. If you haven't read the material, you can't participate in the discussion.
- Assignments: You can't write your assignment until you have done the research.

Where would you source appropriate material and why?

	Good idea	Not so good
Required text or recommended reading list		
Wikipedia		
CDU library data base		
Google scholar		
Google		
Magazines		

Have I reflected on each source?

- ☐ is it on the reading list?
- ☐ is it up to date or fairly recent?
- ☐ does it look readable and manageable?
- ☐ does it have the information I want?

Reading selectively

- ✓ Use the reading list
- ✓ Select the latest information
- ✓ Select the most relevant information
- ✓ Select by reliability. Is the source a well-known one in the field? Is it likely to be biased?
Does it have a good bibliography?

- ☐ Have I looked at the recommended reading list?
- ☐ Do I know what I *need* to read?



Ask yourself the following questions

- What questions am I trying to answer?
- What information do I need?

Know exactly what you're looking for

From your Assignment task, create a plan, and know what information you're looking for. Do not just read until you happen upon something relevant. Set yourself specific questions to get your reading started. Write the questions down. Adapt the questions as your reading progresses. The clearer you are about what you are trying to discover, the easier it is to find it in the text.

- ☐ Have I considered what questions I'm trying to answer?
- ☐ Have I considered what information I need?

Zoom in on a relevant text

When you think you've got a text that is relevant for your research, do not read every word of it. Practise looking for information quickly by following the steps below. Be very focused on making sure it's relevant. Reduce your reading to just material that is relevant.

- Read the Abstract
- Scan the Contents Page and/ or Index. Look for the names of each chapter.
- Scan the introduction or conclusion. These will indicate whether the text is relevant or not.
- Browse through the headings.
- Read the first and last sentence of each paragraph.
- If the article is relevant, look at its Reference List and see if you want to go in that direction.

You may find that you read just 1 or 2 paragraphs in 1 or 2 chapters of particular articles. Be absolutely pedantic about not reading irrelevant material.

- ☐ Do I browse the book quickly?
- ☐ Do I use the contents page, the index, the headings and the sub-headings for guidance?
- ☐ Do I identify which parts of which chapters I need, and put markers in these?
- ☐ Do I read the chapter heading?
- ☐ Do I read the first sentence of each paragraph (which should introduce the topic or idea)?
- ☐ Do I look at any diagrams, graphs or charts?
- ☐ Do I read any summaries or conclusions?
- ☐ Do I make photocopies of important pages?
- ☐ Do I use marker pens to highlight important words and phrases (only)?
- ☐ Do I jot ideas and thoughts in the margins?
- ☐ Do I make notes about the points I highlighted, to help myself remember them?

Scenario:

Imagine your assignment is: '*Describe how to structure an academic essay*'. You choose a text from the library called 'The study skills handbook' by Stella Cottrell.

Which of the following chapters might have the information you need?

1. Preparing for university ☐
2. Identifying your skills ☐
3. Intelligence and learning ☐
4. Working with others ☐
5. Research skills ☐
6. E-learning and technology ☐
7. Writing for university ☐
8. Developing your writing ☐
9. Confidence with numbers ☐
10. Projects, dissertations, reports and case studies ☐

Interactive reading

Reading is an active task

1. Always have paper and pen at hand.
2. Think about what you're reading.
3. Question what you're reading. Then look for answers
4. Make notes of the important points; can you sum them up in 10 words?
5. Make notes of ideas triggered by what you read.
6. Challenge the assumptions of the writer, the logic of the arguments, and the validity of the conclusion.

(We'll talk more about making notes shortly.)

What's your usual approach to reading?

- ☐ Do I think about what I'm reading?
- ☐ Do I question what I'm reading? Do I look for answers to my questions?
- ☐ Do I make notes of the important points, and ideas triggered by what I read?
- ☐ Do I challenge the assumptions of the writer, the logic of the arguments, and the validity of the conclusions?
- ☐ Do I keep trying to anticipate what is coming next, or what the conclusions will be?

**Change the pace of
your reading**

- Scan rapidly for specific information.
- Read quickly to get a general sense of the text
- Then read difficult or dense parts slowly.

Maintain your focus

- Sum up each section
- Take regular breaks
- Do 1 to 6 above
- Move on if it's not relevant.

**Monitor your
comprehension**

- Read a paragraph then stop.
- Without looking back at the text, sum up what you have read in just a few words.
- Jot the main points down.
- If you can't do this, read the text again.

Improve your comprehension

- Start with something general. (This might be where Google or Wikipedia comes in handy but note that you **cannot** obtain references for your final assignment from these sites. You can only use them to get a general idea about the topic.)
- Read the most basic text you can find to get a general overview.
- Become familiar with the main issues and the vocabulary.

Re-read difficult texts

Some academic texts are difficult. Don't panic! You are bound to need to re-read some passages slowly, several times.

- With a pencil, underline the key words and the information you think will be relevant.
- Look especially at headings and first and last sentences of each paragraph.
- Highlight the important ones among those you've underlined.
- Be selective.

- ☐ Do I keep changing the pace, according to the needs of the text?
- ☐ Do I scan rapidly for specific information?
- ☐ Do I read quickly to get the general sense of a passage, and then read difficult or dense parts slowly?

Strategies for speeding up your reading

Reading improves with practice. Your brain becomes more used to seeing unusual words, and your mind becomes used to dealing with complex sentences and ideas.

- **Finger-tracking**
Move one finger down the page, directly from top to bottom, to train your eye to move more quickly down the text. Or slide a blank piece of cardboard down the page so it exposes the text one line at a time. Over time, move the card more quickly.
- **Know when to read aloud**
Some people read out loud from habit. Reading silently can speed up reading in such cases. However, other people can only understand what they read if they *hear* the words. If you read aloud for this reason, try recording yourself so you can re-read 'by ear' rather than by eye.
- **Read larger chunks**
Allow your eyes to take in larger chunks, either by resting them less frequently along a line, or by taking in larger sections of text as you browse. Experiment with holding the book further away, so that your eyes can take in more at once. This is also less tiring for the eyes, which allows you to read for longer periods.
- **Build up to difficult texts.**
Background knowledge of a subject helps to increase reading speed and understanding. If a text looks hard, start with something simpler on the same subject, or read the easiest sections first. You can return to complex sections or more difficult books later. Your brain will become used to this new vocabulary, and this volume of reading. Persevere to give it the practice.

Critical Reading

The purpose of critical reading is to gain a deeper understanding of the material, by bringing your intelligence to play. It involves reading in depth, and criticising the material. As you read a section of a text, look for information to help you answer the following questions.

The Author's Purpose

- Has a contemporary issue or a particular philosophy influenced the author's purpose?
- Is the author defending a particular point of view?
- For whom is the material intended?
- How does the author's argument or perspective relate to other material in the field?

Content

- What is the main theme (thesis or argument) in the material?
- What main points are used to justify or support this theme?
- What explanation or evidence is used to support the main points?
- Does the evidence seem well researched and accurate?
- Which aspects of the topic has the author chosen to concentrate on and which have they omitted?
- Is there any evidence of deliberate bias, such as interpretation of material or choice of sources or factual information?
- How do the contents relate to what you know about the topic?
- In what style has the material been written? For example, is it formal or informal, simple or complex, persuasive, narrative, analytical?
- Has the writer backed up statements and ideas with credible evidence?
- Are logical arguments used?
- Does the writer present the two sides of a case even-handedly?

Overcoming reading problems

The table below outlines some common reading problems. With the student next to you, brainstorm some possible solutions.

Problem	Possible solution
I can't maintain concentration	
I can't get motivated	
The textbook is too difficult	
I'm not happy with my reading comprehension or speed of reading	
My vocabulary is limited	
My eyes keep wandering back over the page	

Check the possible solutions in the table below and see if they're helpful. Tell your study-buddy which ones you intend to use.

Problem	Possible solution
I can't maintain concentration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure your desk is away from distractions and that your study area is well lit, not too hot and not too cold. • Create a graphic outline or mind-map of particularly difficult texts using their headings and sub-headings so you can see where the reading is going.
I can't get motivated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divide your work into manageable chunks. • Make sure you have your purposes for reading clear in your mind. • Give yourself a small reward when you finish.
The textbook is too difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go back to a simpler text to begin with, or read other texts on the same topic. • Go to a dictionary only when you really need to. Instead of looking up a new word, try to guess its meaning by how it fits into the sentence. Unfamiliar words can often be gradually understood from context. • Use skimming and scanning techniques • Cross-reference the readings with your lecture notes. • Form a study-group with your classmates and help each other.
I'm not happy with my reading comprehension or speed of reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read in chunks - avoid the temptation to read every word. • Try to consciously increase reading speed when reading newspaper articles or other non-academic texts. • Ask yourself questions about what you've just read after you've finished to test and improve your understanding.
My vocabulary is limited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the structure of words and make your own glossary of unfamiliar and technical terms. • Carry around a notebook for writing down new words that you hear each day. • Read as widely as you can. Watch movies with the subtitles turned on. • Use a thesaurus or buy a subject dictionary. • Start doing crosswords or playing other word games.
My eyes keep wandering back over the page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the reading material is particularly difficult, returning to earlier material is sometimes not a bad idea. • Tell yourself you will finish this chapter by a certain (realistic) time. • Otherwise, try to force yourself to keep moving. You can try reciting the main ideas at the end of the chapter if you want to check understanding.

Why make notes?

List some reasons why making notes is a good idea.

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After you've thought of a few reasons, check out the box on the next page to see some more reasons.

How helpful are your notes?

For each of these sets of opposite statements, tick along the line depending on how far it is true of your own notes.

Easy to read	-----	Hard to read
Brief, to the point	-----	Too detailed
Easy to understand	-----	Hard to understand
Well organised	-----	Poorly organised
Pages numbered/labeled	-----	No system
Easy to learn from	-----	Difficult to learn from
Well abbreviated	-----	No abbreviations
Important ideas stand out clearly	-----	Not easy to see important ideas
In my own words	-----	Chunks copied from books
My words are clearly separated from quotations	-----	Easy to confuse my words with quoted material
Source material clearly referenced	-----	Hard to see where material comes from

Did this cause you to identify any problems you have with your approach to note-making?
Let's brainstorm possible solutions as a group.

A method for making notes:

- Put your pen down – so you won't be tempted to copy out of the book.
- Read – to answer your own questions.
- Identify and sum up the main ideas. (Hear them in your own words).
- Jot down one or two words to remind you.
- Note *exactly* where information comes from.
- Note real names and quotations *exactly* as they are written.
- Leave space to add details later.

What do you need to note?

Consider:

- Do you really need this information? If so, which bits?
- Will you really use it? When and how?
- Have you noted similar information already?
- What questions do you want to answer with this information?

Why make notes? Making notes helps you to:

- **create a useful record** of important points for future use, or a record of where the information comes from.
- **get started with your assignments**, because the act of writing gets your ideas flowing.
- **understand and envision**, as focusing on selecting which information to note helps you to form a picture of how everything fits together.
- **remember**, because summing things up briefly helps both long-term and motor memory. Adding your own symbols to notes, for example by drawing stars or arrows, can make them more visually memorable.
- **revise for exams**, especially if your notes are well organised. The fact that you've taken notes means some information has settled in your memory.

Organise your notes

- Use a separate file for each subject area
- Use file dividers to separate major topics
- Use a separate page for each minor topic
- Arrange ideas under headings or questions
- Label files and dividers clearly and appropriately
- Number and label pages so you can find and re-file them quickly
- Keep an updated contents page at the front of each file.

Strategies for making notes

- Think before you write
- Keep notes brief
- Keep notes organised
- Use your own words
- Leave a wide margin and spaces – to add notes later

Useful strategies

- Note key words and main ideas
- Write phrases – not sentences
- Use abbreviations
- Use headings
- Number points
- Make the page memorable – with colour, illustrations, and so on
- Link up points – using arrows, dotted lines, colour, numbers, boxes
- Note sources of info exactly
- Write quotations in a different colour

Unhelpful strategies

- ~~Copying chunks and phrases~~
- ~~Writing more notes than you can use again~~
- ~~Writing out notes several times to make them neater~~

Tidying messy notes

- Draw a 'square' around sections of notes in different colours to make them stand out
- Use a ruler to divide the page up between sections
- Draw a ring round floating bits of information
- Link stray information by colour-coding it

Suggestion for Note Page Layout

Divide your page into 3 columns.

The first column should be for your notes based on the reading. This section may include paraphrased information from the original text, (paraphrasing means to rewrite somebody else's ideas in your own words); or direct quotes. Ultimately, most of your note-making should paraphrase or summarise the key ideas of the author(s). Use direct quotes sparingly in assignments and only in situations where they seem to be the most appropriate way of expressing something.

The second column is used for the page number on which you have found a particular piece of information. This is essential for two reasons. Firstly, when directly quoting you must acknowledge the page number(s) on which you located information. Secondly, if you need to clarify your notes, you need to be able to quickly locate the information.

The third column, which is vital in effective note-making, is used for your comments on the text. Your comments are important because this is where you relate what you are reading to the various ideas that you are trying to develop, you acknowledge similarities and differences with other authors, or you identify where your knowledge needs developing further. This is the section that:

- encourages you to think critically about your text
- to question what the author is saying
- to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the author's ideas.
- where you start making links between the various authors that you have read
- consider where and how your ideas are positioned in the research, and how they may be validated or questioned.

For example,

Notes from texts	Bibliographic info, including page #	My comments & questions

Practise effective reading and note making.

1. In the article below, read the introduction, then the first sentence in each paragraph. Do you now have a general idea of what the article's about?
2. Explain your understanding of the article to your neighbour.
3. Re-read the article fully as quickly as possible for a fuller understanding.
4. Skim now, and make notes of the main points. (On this occasion, your purpose is to understand this aspect of intelligence. You are not reading with specific questions in mind.)
5. Have your notes checked in class, if time allows; otherwise, send them to us for feedback.

Is intelligence a question of how much you know?

The popular view of intelligence is that it is an ability to answer the type of closed questions set on 'Mastermind'. This does not take into consideration aspects of intelligence such as creativity or coping in real-life situations. Another view is that intelligence is a capacity for abstract reasoning, such as formulating general hypotheses, and that you don't need to know much at all to reason well.

Donaldson (1978) argued that the way we reason depends upon the particular context we are in and what we already know. For example, she demonstrated that both children and adults interpret what they hear by attending not just to the meaning of words, but also to their understanding of those words based on their own thoughts and previous knowledge. It follows that the amount and kind of background knowledge that you bring to academic study will affect the ease with which you can process new information and reason with it.

Our ability to think in abstract ways about something may depend on having already had real life experience of similar problems. Butterworth (1992) describes how abstract notions such as 'generosity' are actually concrete social realities. The real-life concrete experience allows us to develop a mental model, and this model later provides the basis for abstract thinking. If we have gaps in concrete experience – for example with manipulating numbers – we are likely to find it harder to move onto more abstract examples until we have filled the gaps.

Butterworth suggests that when presented with a familiar problem in an unfamiliar context, we may be unable to recognise that the two are the same. This can make us look like complete beginners when we are not. We may need somebody to point out the similarity between what we already know and the new learning. When we see the link, we can do the problem.

.../cont

From *The Study Skills Handbook*, Stella Cottrell, 3rd edn. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

Answers:

Example of an understanding of the article by only reading the introduction and first sentence of each paragraph. The article could be correctly summarised in many different ways, and yet be quite different.

One hypothesis about how to gauge intelligence is to measure a person's skill at answering general knowledge questions. This, however, is limiting because there are other intelligences besides being able to recall learned knowledge. A proposal by Donaldson (1978) is that intelligence is a reflection of a person's ability for abstract reasoning, and that this ability changes according to context. By this he means that if a person hasn't had a similar experience in the past, he will find it difficult to come to a reasonable understanding of it. Butterworth (1992) furthers that argument with the suggestion that people would find it difficult to recognise a familiar problem if the context were unfamiliar.

This material has been modified from the following sources:

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/read.html>

The Study Skills Handbook, Stella Cottrell, 3rd edn. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/read1.html>

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/reading/taking-notes/4.xml>

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/notemake.html>

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/read2.html>

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/reading/taking-notes/4.1.xml>