# Effective Reading

Your course at university is likely to involve a lot of reading, both to gain overall knowledge and understanding of your subject, and to research specific aspects of it as you undertake assignments. It is therefore important to plan and carry out your reading efficiently, using the most appropriate techniques.

* ‘Surveying’ or ‘skim’ readingis useful for forming a general impression or overview, finding core information or identifying one or two specific points.
* ‘Jumping in’ at any point of a text in order to sample it, can be useful when undertaking an initial exploration of a topic.
* ‘Everyday’reading(reading everything with equal concentration all the way through) is useful if you are reading a core text to underpin your understanding of a topic/discipline and will aid you in researching it.
* Thorough reading and analysis of relevant passages and chapters is commonly associated with academic assignment research. It involves cross-checking information, looking up terminology, definitions and concepts, and exploring different viewpoints or explanations.

**Effective reading is a process in which you will: 1. clarify your goals; 2. select your sources; and 3. read selected material in detail.**

## 1. Clarify your goals

Before you commit time to reading, spend a little time thinking ahead:

* What particular issues do you expect to find? What are you looking for specifically?
* Think about precise issues that your assignment requires; or those that were not covered in earlier reading, or that remain unclear. This doesn’t prevent you finding other areas of interest, raising new questions or enjoying the challenge of thinking about unexpected issues as you encounter them.

## Have an agenda

Having an ‘agenda’ has three advantages:

* Your selection of reading material will be improved.
* Your receptivity to information will be enhanced.
* Your reading will build speed.

## 2. Select your sources

Take a strategic approach to your reading. Use reading lists carefully and selectively, identifying core material, less important material, and material that is specialised but relevant – perhaps short journal articles on relatively narrow topics. You should aim to start with core reading to build up your knowledge and confidence. Once you have a good grasp of the subject, move on to more specialised material.

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| **Reading sequence** | **Type of material** | **Proportion of reading material used in an academic task** |
| Initial reading | Core texts e.g. textbooks or essential reading identified on reading lists. Probably book-based material but may well include some journal articles. | 40►50% |
| Secondary reading | Important reading, probably a mixture of books and journal articles. | 20 ►30% |
| Further reading | Specialised but relevant. Probably journal articles, both hard copy and electronic, and individual online sources. | 20 ►30% |

If you are struggling to understand an account of a concept or theory, see if there is an easier source to read (e.g. an introduction to) that may provide a basic understanding, you can then move onto more advanced reading. Please note, although you may want to look at Wikipedia, you should never use it or any other informal (and not necessarily accurate) source as a formal reference for an assignment.

**Finding the right material:**Whilst some texts may come recommended, others you may need to find for yourself. Finding the right book, or chapter, or journal article in which to invest your time reading in detail, requires you to ‘survey’ likely material beforehand. This may involve looking at a book’s contents page or index to get an idea of the topics discussed or quickly skim-reading (described below) its introduction (or the abstract/summary, in the case of a journal article) for an idea of the concepts and arguments it contains.

Introductions are usually fairly succinct; skim reading them shouldn’t take more than 10-15 minutes, but it will ‘set you up’ for your actual reading task. If you get into the habit of surveying, it will become a natural part of the reading process. It works particularly well with book material, but can be adapted to journals and online resources, as follows:

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| **Books** | **Journals** | **Online** |
| Title + series  Year of publication  Revision/edition  Foreword/introduction  Contents  Index  Charts/tables  Diagrams  Maps  Illustrations  Chapter headings  Early sections of chapters (skim-read) | Editorial comments  Titles of other papers  Abstract  (+Abstracts for other papers)  Footnotes/citations  Charts/tables  Opening section + closure/conclusion (skim-read) | Site map  Sources  Sponsoring organisation  Information about the author  Date produced  Date revised  No. of ‘hits’ (if available)  Visual material  Links to other sites |

## 3. Reading strategies

After the survey stage, ‘skim’ your selected text before you start reading more carefully. Skim-reading is a technique that allows you to get a quick gist of what a text is saying without getting held up by detail.

## Skim-reading

1. Read as quickly and as smoothly as possible, letting your eye travel from left to right and then from top to bottom of a page of text. Use a ruler, a pencil, a folded sheet of paper – or your finger – to ‘pull’ your eyes across and down the page.
2. Keep going. Set aside the time (10 minutes, say, for 10 pages) to make sure you skim read the whole text in one go.
3. Do not stop to wrestle with words or concepts that you don’t understand. Instead put a mark against them - and anything of particular interest – to return to later.
4. Look for the key sentences in any one paragraph. Often an academic paragraph will be based on a topic sentence followed by the evidence that supports it.
5. Quickly reading the first and last sentence of each paragraph can be a good way to skim read a text.
6. If you feel you can’t read without taking notes, take only the briefest notes or annotations – a few bullet-points will be fine.

Skim-reading allows you to absorb information more effectively on a subsequent reading. So, read lightly, read quickly and keep it going, until you are ready for the second stage.

## Scan reading

Now you have an overview of the text, ‘scan’ read a few pages or sections of your text. Read more slowly but maintain forward momentum. Take summative notes as you proceed, but keep them brief and purposeful (note page numbers where ideas come from). Coupled with the sense of context gained from earlier skim reading, you will be able to gain a stronger sense of the overall meaning(s) in the text, as well as identify and mark the most interesting and relevant sections related to your assignment. These you can now read in detail.

If the chapters or sections of text that you have selected are quite long, break them down into shorter, manageable sections. Of course, your understanding won’t be instantaneous. You will need to engage with individual sections of your text, extracting the key points and the evidence that supports them. Start at the beginning of the text – tracing the development and exploration of its argument. Returning to earlier parts of the text is fine, as long as its purpose is to focus on the main narrative. However, avoid darting about and flicking through other sections (fine at the skim reading stage) in favour of careful, systematic sequential reading – of the chapter, passage or journal article – from start to finish.

During this process you will need to take clear and accurate notes. To avoid issues of plagiarism make a clear visual distinction between your thoughts and the words and ideas taken directly from your source and record the bibliographic details that you will need if you use that source in an assignment. Use the following library guidance and search tools to find books and resources.

Use the QR code to book appointments, view our events calendar, watch skills videos and more…

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