

Tips for reading effectively

Reading at university

While you are at university you will have a lot of reading to do, so it is important to do it efficiently. It is important that you know **why** you are reading a particular text. When you ask yourself this question, you are really asking:

- Am I reading for general background information?
- What specific information am I looking for?
- How am I going to use the information I am reading?
- Am I reading to prepare for an exam?

The purpose of your reading influences your approach. We read many texts in everyday life, often for different purposes, and the way we read them will be influenced by the purpose of our reading. The same is true of the reading you do for your studies. Once you work out what you are reading and why, you can adjust how you go about reading.

Getting ready to read

Before reading, take the following three steps:

1. Look at the text you are going to read. Determine its title, type, (book, journal, article) and intended audience (see [Reading critically Quick Guide](#) under *Researching and organising information*).
2. Ask yourself about the author or authors. Is the author an authority in the area? Is the author likely to be biased or pushing a particular agenda?
3. Check to see if there is a *contents* page or an *abstract*. The contents page of a book will help you to see which, if any, parts of the book are relevant to you. The abstract of an article is a brief summary of the main points of the article. It will tell you if the article is likely to be relevant or not.

If possible, share ideas and interpretations with a group of classmates. If you are an online student this may be more difficult, but you can use the Discussion area of a unit's Blackboard site to ask questions and swap information with fellow students. Students can also use the Create a Study Group in their Blackboard site.

Use how the text is structured to help you

Texts are structured in different ways. For example, they might be *explaining* how something happens, *comparing* and *contrasting* information, *arguing* the case for some proposition, breaking some phenomenon down into its *parts* or classifying things according to *types*. A long article might be doing several of these jobs. As you read you should be asking yourself *what job is this text doing*, as this will have a big influence on its structure.

Although texts are put together differently they all have some similarities in how the information will be ordered. For example, the beginning of a chapter will generally tell you what that chapter is going to be about, and the end of the chapter will summarise what the chapter has been about. Likewise, the topic sentence of a paragraph will tell the reader what the paragraph is going to be about and often a summary sentence will tell the reader which point in the paragraph was the most important.

Reading for assessments

One good strategy when you read for assessments is to start off general and then move into more specific information. Before you start reading you should think about what you already know about the assessment topic. The first part you read when you prepare for an assessment should be the relevant pages of your textbook because the textbook will give you good, solid background information. This information will help you to make more sense of the more specialised, focused information that you will find in something like a journal article. First you get a general idea of the big picture and then you focus in on the details.

After you have read the relevant part of your textbook look carefully at the reading list for the unit or, if there is one, the list of suggested readings for the assessment. Again, use the principle of moving from general to specific. The more information you know when you start reading highly specific articles the easier it will be for you to understand them.

If you have worked your way through the readings for the assessment and still need more sources start looking for some of the sources that are referred to most often in the readings. These will be written by key researchers in the field.

How to read effectively

Skimming

Skimming is a way of reading where you basically give something a quick once-over so that you decide whether you will read it in detail later. When you skim you read quickly, looking for main points. A good way to skim is to use the technique of looking at the first sentence of paragraphs. Also look at headings and sub-headings. This will give you a quick idea of what the article is generally about.

Scanning

Scanning is similar to skimming except that when you scan you are usually looking for a particular piece of information, like a key word. Scanning, therefore, is more tightly focused than skimming.

Reading in detail

Once you have decided that an article is useful for your assessment, you can start to read in more detail. When you do this, **don't** read one word at a time. Move your eyes forwards and backwards to fill in gaps to build up a picture of what the whole text means, not just know what each word means. Often you can work out what a word means by reading the words around it. The context can give you a lot of hints. If you have already prepared for reading and skimmed the text you should not find anything that is completely unfamiliar to you, or which does not connect to something you already know.

Levels of comprehension

When you read something in detail you can test how much you understand what you have read by applying three tests for comprehension. Ask yourself:

- Do I understand what the writer actually says? This is called *literal* comprehension. This involves being able to recall some of the actual words the writer has used and being able to re-tell the 'story' of an article.
- Can I read between the lines of what the writer is saying? That is, can you make inferences about what something might mean apart from just the literal wording? This is called *interpretive* comprehension.
- Can I read beyond this specific text and make associations with other things I know about the subject? This is called *applied* comprehension.

When an assessment is marked you will generally do better if you can demonstrate *interpretive* and *applied* comprehension.

Reference

Rolls, N. & Wignell, P. (2009). Chapter 3: Critical Reading. In *Communicating at University: Skills for Success* (3rd ed., pp. 75–101). Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press.

Check the *SCU Learning Zone* for more related Quick Guides.