

IMPROVE YOUR READING OF ACADEMIC TEXTS

Other Handouts:

- Making Notes in Lectures
- Time Management

Key definitions:

Skim – to read quickly for main ideas or supporting points/details

Scan – to move the eyes quickly over a text to find a specific point or points

Step 1: How to approach academic reading.

Think about why you are asked to read a particular academic text.

Is it to:

- gain information about a topic ?
- widen your understanding of the number of issues involved in the topic?
- deepen your understanding of the complexity of the topic?
- develop your capacity to discuss the topic?
- change the way that you think about the topic?
- improve your capacity to think logically and critically?
- all of the above?

Gaining information about a topic is only the first of many reasons why students are asked to read academic texts at university. When you graduate from university and work as a professional in your area, you will need to keep up-to-date with the latest developments; good reading skills will be essential.

Step 2: What to expect of an academic text

How do you read a novel, a newspaper or a website?

- Do you sit in a comfortable chair with a hot cup of coffee perhaps and open a novel with the expectation of being entertained?
- Do you glance quickly through a newspaper or magazine for enjoyment?
- Do you surf the web looking at interesting websites?

Reading an academic text is different to all of these forms of reading.

Tip!

Expect an academic text to be like a problem to be solved or a puzzle to be worked out

Step 3: How to plan your reading

Look at your weekly study schedule and make sure you have given yourself specific times to do that week's reading. If you are a full-time university student, you need to plan for a 40 hour week to: attend classes and lecture, keep up with the reading, and work on assignments.

How have you divided up your reading schedule?

Plan to do key readings before a lecture.

- Set aside a realistic block of time for reading an article. This should be at least 1 hour.
- Break up the time set aside for reading into 15 minute blocks with a five minute break for stretching and walking around. This helps you to maintain your concentration levels.

Reading is an active and essential part of the learning process at university and needs to be planned as part of your overall timetable. It is all right if you don't understand an academic text the first time that you read it. We have all experienced this!

Step 4: How the reading links to your learning

Link the learning objectives set in the unit study guide with the ideas explored and discussed in your readings.

- What does the unit coordinator expect you to gain from this reading?
- Why do you think it was set for you to read?
- How has it improved or increased your understanding of the topic?

Step 5: How to preview or scan a reading

Have a quick look at the reading to see how long it is. How much time do you think it will take to read? (at first year university level, it often will take double the time you expect). Check your schedule to make sure you have given yourself enough time to focus on reading the article. Spend the first 15 minutes of your reading schedule previewing or surveying the article by asking yourself the following questions:

Title

- What does the title tell you about the intention of the author?
- Why is it worded in that way?
- What is being highlighted as important by the title?
- How does the title read if you turn it into a question?

Headings and Subheadings

Hint!

If there are no headings or sections, quickly skim through the first few paragraphs and the last few paragraphs to find reader directions and key information.

- What are the headings and subheadings in the reading?
- What is the author signalling by these headings about his/her argument?

- Can you relate the headings and sub-headings to the title?
- How do the subheadings read if you turn them into questions?

Tip!

Write out the title and all the headings. This allows you to get an overview of the structure of the argument of the article.

Graphics (Illustration, Pictures, Diagrams & Tables)

- What do these tell you?
- Can you relate this information to the title, headings or subheadings?

Introduction and Conclusion

- Does the writer explicitly state their purpose (aims and /or thesis (argument)) in the introduction or conclusion?
- What are the main points the author highlights in the first few paragraphs of the article and in the conclusion of the article?

Tip!

If there are separate introduction and conclusion sections, pay particular attention to the first and last paragraph as this is where key information is usually found.

Key terms

- What are the key terms used in the first few paragraphs or last few paragraphs?
- Check that you are sure of the exact meaning of these terms by using a dictionary (you will find a conceptual dictionary very useful)

If the previewing takes longer than 15 minutes, this is fine – still take a quick 5 minute break and then come back to finish off the process.

Step 6: Free Writing

Take a blank piece of paper and write without stopping for three minutes on your first impressions of the reading. You might begin with an emotional response in terms of the difficulty or frustration that you may have experienced with the language. (It is useful to get this first reaction out of the way to clear your mind and then you can respond to the key ideas in the reading.)

- Do not stop to correct spelling, grammar or punctuation.
- Imagine your mind is at the tip of your pen/pencil or fingertips (if typing into a computer) and you are releasing all the information onto the page or screen.
- Let the words flow freely and skip from subject to subject at will.
- If you are using a computer to free write, turn off your monitor so that you cannot see what you are writing.

Tip!

Write down questions that you have about the reading from this initial previewing exercise.

Step 7: Read through the entire article

Ask yourself the questions that you have generated through the previewing exercise as you read through the entire article.

Step 8: 'Mark up' the reading

Mark the reading (if it is NOT a library book) by highlighting different parts of the argument.

Tip!

You will find a photocopy of the article useful for this (make sure the photocopy includes all the relevant referencing details of the original).

For example:

- Pick out the main points and highlight these in, for example, blue.
- Identify what evidence there is to support these main points, or find examples that illustrate these main points, and highlight these in a second colour such as green.
- Note the words or phrases whose meaning you are unsure and highlight these in a third colour (red) – you can follow these up later and find a definition for them.
- Write a one sentence summary in your own words of the main point of all key paragraphs; place these in the margin of the page beside the relevant paragraph.

Remember! *Reading academic texts is an active process that **always** involves writing.*

Step 9: Make notes on the reading

Take a sheet of paper from your note-book and draw a vertical line down the page to create two columns with the left column wider than the right. In the wide column, write notes in paragraph form that summarise key information and ideas from the article. Once you have completed this for the entire article, look at these notes and reduce your paragraphs to a few sentences. Write these sentences in the narrow column on the right. This will force you to analyse and identify the exact information that is essential in this reading.

Tip!

File these notes by week or topic in the folder you are using for each unit. This is very useful for your revision for exams.