READING AND MAKING NOTES

Reading and note-making is at the heart of all academic study. Much of what you will learn in your time at university will be as a result of your own independent research - reading books, journals and websites on your topic, making notes and using what you have learnt as evidence to support your arguments in seminars, presentations and written assignments.

It's an important part of your studies, so it's worth learning how to do it well. Learning how to manage your reading and take effective notes can give you back hours of your time for studying.

Managing academic reading

Reading is one of the essential activities of studying - it's not called reading for a degree for nothing! However it can be daunting when you're faced with an extensive reading list. How do you know which ones to read? Or which bits of the text to read? What can you do to make reading complex texts more manageable? And how can you avoid it taking all of your time?

This guide will suggest ways for you to improve your reading skills and to read in a more focused and selective manner.

Setting reading goals

Before starting to read you need to consider why you are reading and what you are trying to learn. You will need to vary the way you read accordingly.

If you are reading for general interest and to acquire background information for lectures you will need to read the topic widely but with not much depth.

If you are reading for an assignment you will need to focus the reading around the assignment question and may need to study a small area of the subject in great depth. Jot down the essay question, make a note of any questions you have about it, and don't get side-tracked and waste time on non-relevant issues.

Choosing the right texts

It is unlikely that you will be able - or be expected - to read all the books and articles on your reading list. You will be limited by time and by the availability of the material.

To decide whether a book is relevant and useful:

- Look at the author's name, the title and the date of publication. Is it essential reading? Is it out of date?
- Read the publisher's blurb on the cover or look through the editor's introduction to see whether it is relevant.
- Look at the contents page. Does it cover what you want? Is it at the right level? Are there too few pages on the topic - or too many?
- Look through the introduction to get an idea of the author's approach.
- Look up an item in the index (preferably something you know a bit about) and read through one or two paragraphs to see how the author deals with the material.
- Look though the bibliography to see the range of the author's sources.
- Are the examples, illustrations, diagrams etc. easy to follow and helpful for your purpose?

To select useful articles from journals or research papers:

1. Read the summary or abstract. Is it relevant?
2. Look at the Conclusions and skim-read the Discussion, looking at headings. Is it worth reading carefully because it is relevant or interesting?
3. Look through the Introduction. Does it summarise the field in a helpful way? Does it provide a useful literature review?

4. Unless you have loads of time, only read the whole article if one or more of the following is satisfied:
   - It is a seminal piece of work – essential reading.
   - It is highly relevant to your essay, etc.
   - It is likely that you can get ideas from it.
   - There is nothing else available and you are going to have to make the most of this.
   - It is so interesting that you can’t put it down!

*If there is no reading list...*

Use the library website and look up Subject help.
Find a general textbook on the subject.
Use encyclopaedias and subject based dictionaries.
Do a web search BUT stay focused on your topic AND think about the reliability of the web sites. (For help with this, see the Library’s guide to Evaluating websites.)
Browse the relevant shelves in the library and look for related topics.
Ask your tutor for a suggestion for where to start.
The Library also have advice and a series of brief videos showing you how to find and access Library resources on their website.

**Tip:** You can download a free app to your phone called BookMyne which you can use to search the Library catalogue, place a hold, renew your loans and generally keep on top of your Library activity while on the move. You can even set it up to tell you when your books are due back!

**How many sources should you read?**

It is impossible to give a figure for the number of sources you should read when researching an assignment. It is more important to think about the quality of the sources and how well you use and interpret them, than the number you read.

It is not a good idea to rely on 1 or 2 sources very heavily as this shows a lack of wider reading, and can mean you just get a limited view without thinking of an argument of your own.

Nor is it useful (or possible) to read everything on the reading list and try to fit it all into your assignment. This usually leads to losing your own thoughts under a mass of reading.

The best way is to be strategic about your reading and identify what you need to find out and what the best sources to use to find this information.

It can be better to read less and try to think about, and understand, the issues more clearly - take time to make sure you really get the ideas rather than reading more and more which can increase your confusion.

**Going beyond the reading list**

- Use the library catalogue to find other books on that topic. Either click on the subject headings in the full record of the books you wanted; or make a note of their call numbers and check on the shelves for similar titles.
- Book items in advance from Short Loan and photocopy the relevant pages
- Look for relevant journal articles - bound and unbound copies of journals are only loaned for one day, so are more likely to be on the shelf than books. Or see if there’s an e-journal version of the title you want.
- Check whether your department has its own library, or box collection of photocopies of key articles and chapters.
- Use online resources BUT always evaluate them to see if they are appropriate for academic purposes. (For help with this, see the Library’s guide to Evaluating websites.)
- Ask around to see if any of your fellow students has the books you need. You may be able to borrow them briefly to photocopy any material you need. But be careful to return it promptly - and if you lend a library book taken out with your ticket to someone else, make sure they take it back on time, or your account will be blocked!
Active reading

Keep focused on your reading goals. One way to do this is to ask questions as you read and try to read actively and creatively. It is a good idea to think of your own subject related questions but the following may be generally useful:

Collecting information

- What do I want to know about?
- What is the main idea behind the writing?
- What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence?
- In research, what are the major findings?

Questioning the writing

- What are the limitations or flaws in the evidence?
- Can the theory be disproved or is it too general?
- What examples would prove the opposite theory?
- What would you expect to come next?
- What would you like to ask the author?

Forming your own opinion

- How does this fit in with my own theory/beliefs?
- How does it fit with the opposite theory/beliefs?
- Is my own theory/beliefs still valid?
- Am I surprised?
- Do I agree?

Reading techniques

Your reading speed is generally limited by your thinking speed. If ideas or information requires lots of understanding then it is necessary to read slowly. Choosing a reading technique must depend upon why you are reading:

To enjoy the language or the narrative?

As a source of information and/or ideas?

To discover the scope of a subject - before a lecture, seminar or research project?

To compare theories or approaches by different authors or researchers?

For a particular piece of work e.g. essay, dissertation?

It is important to keep your aims in mind. Most reading will require a mixture of techniques e.g. scanning to find the critical passages followed by reflective reading.

Scanning

Good for searching for particular information or to see if a passage is relevant:

Look up a word or subject in the index or look for the chapter most likely to contain the required information.

Use a pencil and run it down the page to keep your eyes focusing on the search for key words.

Skim reading

Good to quickly gain an overview, familiarise yourself with a chapter or an article or to understand the structure for later note-taking.

Don't read every word.

Do read summaries, heading and subheadings.

Look at tables, diagrams, illustrations, etc.

Read first sentences of paragraphs to see what they are about.

If the material is useful or interesting, decide whether just some sections are relevant or whether you need to read it all.

Reflective or critical reading

Good for building your understanding and knowledge.

Think about the questions you want to answer.

Read actively in the search for answers.

Look for an indication of the chapter's structure or any other "map" provided by the author.

Follow through an argument by looking for its structure:

- main point
- subpoints
- reasons, qualifications, evidence, examples...

Look for "signposts" – sentences or phrases to indicate the structure e.g. "There are three main..."
reasons, First.. Secondly.. Thirdly.. " or to emphasise the main ideas e.g. "Most importantly.. " "To summarise.."

Connecting words may indicate separate steps in the argument e.g. "but", "on the other hand", "furthermore", "however"..

After you have read a chunk, make brief notes remembering to record the page number as well as the complete reference (Author, title, date, journal/publisher, etc)

At the end of the chapter or article put the book aside and go over your notes, to ensure that they adequately reflect the main points.

Ask yourself - how has this added to your knowledge?

Will it help you to make out an argument for your essay?

Do you agree with the arguments, research methods, evidence..?

Add any of your own ideas – indicating that they are YOUR ideas use [ ] or different colours.

**Rapid reading**

Good for scanning and skim-reading, but remember that it is usually more important to understand what you read than to read quickly.

Reading at speed is unlikely to work for reflective, critical reading.

If you are concerned that you are really slow:

* Check that you are not mouthing the words – it will slow you down

* Do not stare at individual words – let your eyes run along a line stopping at every third word. Practise and then lengthen the run until you are stopping only four times per line, then three times, etc.

The more you read, the faster you will become as you grow more familiar with specialist vocabulary, academic language and reading about theories and ideas. So keep practising…

If you still have concerns about your reading speed, book an individual advice session with a Study Adviser.

**Common abbreviations in academic texts**

**ibid** : In the same work as the last footnote or reference (from ibidem meaning: in the same place)

**op.cit** : In the work already mentioned (from operato citato meaning in the work cited)

**ff** : and the following pages

**pp** : pages

**cf** : compare

**passim** : to be found throughout a particular book.

You may also find journal titles abbreviated. You may find a list in your Course Handbook of the most often used in your discipline. Or ask the Academic Liaison Librarian for your subject.

**Effective note-making**

Effective note-making is an important practice to master at university. You have a lot of new knowledge and you need to develop reliable mechanisms for recording and retrieving it when necessary. But note-making is also a learning process in itself, helping you to process and understand the information you receive.

**Good note-making...**

✓ enables you to avoid unintentional plagiarism

✓ helps you to focus on what is important in what you are reading or hearing

✓ helps you to understand and remember material, and make connections

✓ helps you to structure the assignments you’re researching

✓ provides a personal record of what you’ve learnt (more useful than your lecturer’s or friends’ notes) and records your questions and ideas

✓ sets you up for exam revision.

**There can be problems...**

Note-making can distract you from listening to lectures.

Note-making can put additional stress on those who do not write naturally.

You can end up with so many notes that you have to spend twice the amount of time going through them again to find out the important points!
Developing more effective note-making practices will help you to avoid these problems, and make your studying less stressful and time-consuming.

Making note-making more effective

The two key principles are [1] to be meticulous and accurate, and [2] to be active rather than passive.

Being meticulous and accurate about recording sources and direct quotations is an important part of academic discipline, as well as helping to avoid accidental plagiarism. This means:

- always recording the necessary details for any source you use as soon as you start taking notes. Don't wait till you've finished reading - you may forget, or misplace the text.

Two things to watch out for...

...if you photocopy an article or chapter, make sure you include the page numbers as you will need them for referencing - write them in if they fall off the edge of the photocopy (at least the first page so you can count forward)

...if you are making notes from a website, keep a note of the URL (website address) and the date that you accessed it - you will need these for referencing

The most effective note-taking is active not passive. Active learning helps you to make meaning from what you learn: passive learning is allowing yourself to be an empty vessel into which knowledge is poured with no way of organising or making meaning from it. You are less likely to remember things you learn passively, which means more checking your notes while you're writing assignments, and more repeated effort when you come to revise.

Passive note-taking includes:

- underlining words
- cutting and pasting from online documents
- trying to write everything you hear in a lecture
- copying slides from the screen

Active note-taking means:

✓ thinking about what you want to get out of your research before you start
✓ looking for answers to any questions you may have about the topic
✓ looking for connections within the topic you're studying, and to other topics on your course
✓ writing notes mostly in your own words - your own explanation of what something says or means
✓ recording direct quotes only when it's important to have the exact words that someone else has used (i.e. when how they say something is as significant as what they say)

Making your notes user-friendly

You'll know how good your notes are when you try to use them! Here are some suggestions to make your notes easier to read, easier to understand and easier to find when you need them.

* Make your notes brief and be selective
* Keep them well-spaced so you can see individual points and add more details later if necessary
* Show the relationships between the main points (link with a line along which you write how they relate to each other, for instance)
* Use your own words to summarise - imagine someone has asked you "so what did x say about this?" and write down your reply
* Illustrations, examples and diagrams can help to put ideas in a practical context
* Make them memorable using: colour, pattern, highlighting and underlining
* Read through to make sure they’re clear - will you still understand them when you come to revise?
* File with care! - use a logical system so you can find them when you need them, but keep it simple or you won’t use it.

Using linear notes and spidergrams

These two forms of note-taking are useful for different things.

**Linear notes**

Linear notes are what most people are used to doing. They are written down a page with headings and subheadings. They should have plenty of room for detail.

Here are some suggestions for making linear notes more useful.
- Use loads of HEADINGS for main ideas and concepts
- Use subheadings for points within those ideas
- Stick to one point per line
- Underline key words
- You can use numbering to keep yourself organised
- Use abbreviations - and don't worry about using full sentences
- Leave plenty of SPACE - for adding detail and for easy reading

**Spidergrams**

Spider diagrams are on one page and are good for showing structure and organising your ideas. They are sometimes called mindmaps, which indicates how they are good for making connections clear and visual.

Though some people don't like this style of note-taking, there are a number of advantages to using spidergrams:
- They keep your notes on one page - so you’re less likely to ramble
- They show the main points at a glance
- They keep points grouped together - good for essay structure
- They clearly show where there are gaps which need more research

**To make a spidergram:**
1. Use whole side of paper - A4 at least!
2. Put the subject in the centre
3. Use one branch per main point - radiating outwards
4. Don’t start by making your points too big - you will need more space than you think
5. You can add how the points are connected on the joining spokes
6. Make it large enough - enough space to add detail
7. Add smaller branches for detail & examples
8. Summarise just enough to remind you of point - details and definitions can be added as footnotes
9. Label with the source

**Taking notes in lectures**

Trying to listen, think, read from slides, and write notes at the same time is not just difficult - it's plain impossible! So cut down the amount of notes you take in lectures and do more listening:

- don’t copy slides if they’re going to be available on Blackboard or in a handout
- skim read any handouts so you know if they include things like dates and formulae
- you may find it more useful to write notes on the handout rather than having handout + notes to file
- if you find it especially difficult to write notes and listen at the same time (for instance, if you are dyslexic), consider using a mini-recorder so you can listen at your own pace after the lecture

What you do before and after lectures can be as important as what you do during them. If you can anticipate the main points, you will find the lecture easier to understand, and you will have a better idea of when something is worth taking a note of. So:
Before the lecture...

Think about the title and outline description of the lecture and how this connects to the rest of the module

Think about what you know about the topic already, and what you expect or hope to learn from the lecture

If it's a completely new topic, try to get a basic idea of what it's about beforehand - read an introductory paragraph from a textbook or encyclopaedia, for instance.

During the lecture...

* Listen for clues to the shape or structure of the lecture to help you to organise your notes, for instance: "Today we shall be looking at..." "I am going to discuss three main aspects..." "Now I want to move on to..." "I do want to emphasise..." "To sum up..."

* Identify key words - for instance, notice when words or phrases are being repeated. Underline or circle in your notes any words that seem to be really significant. Are there particular words that seem to sum up the overall message? (For instance, 'oppression' or 'conflict' or 'solution'.)

* Be an active listener - not a sponge - try to connect what is being said to what you already know (this is where the preparation bit comes in handy!). Ask yourself, do I agree? How does it fit in with what I already knew? Am I surprised? If not, why not? How did she get to that conclusion?

After the lecture...

* Put some time aside soon after the lecture to sit somewhere quiet and consider what you have just learnt. Summarise and write what you think were the main points in a few sentences. Add anything you need or want to find out more about, and any questions it raised in your mind.

* Follow up anything that you think really important - research the answers yourself, discuss it with a friend, make a list of questions to raise if you have a seminar on the topic, ask your lecturer if you're really confused and can't find the answers elsewhere.

* Then file your notes away carefully so you can find them when you need them for assignments or revision.

Reading e-books for university study

What are e-books?

E-books are electronic versions of print texts. You can read them on various devices, including your laptop or University computers. The Library has purchased access rights to thousands of e-books which you can access and read on or off campus.

So when all the print copies of the book you wanted are out on loan... or you've reached your limit on the number of books you can borrow at any one time from the Library... or it's cold and raining and you don't want to leave your room - it's worth checking to see if there's an e-copy.

E-books are available to you 24/7 from any device which is connected to the internet so are great when you're off-campus.

Finding e-books using Enterprise

The Library has purchased thousands of e-books, all of which can be found using the Library catalogue Enterprise.

Enter your search terms into the search box and once you've received your results list, limit your results using the Online and Book filters on the left-hand side.

Your results should now only include e-books. To read the e-book, follow the Click here for online access link and enter your university username and password.

Finding e-books using Summon

Most of our e-books can now also be found in Summon, the Library's discovery service. Using Summon will give you more results, as it is often able to search for your words at chapter-level.

To only see e-books in your results list, select the Publication Type E-book from the limits on the left-hand side.
You will need to refine your search even further to get results which are most relevant to you and the topic you are searching for. Look at the Library’s guide on Summon for search tips, including how to limit your results.

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Some platforms, such as MyiLibrary and EBSCOhost only allow an e-book to be viewed by one or sometimes three people at a time.

If you get a message saying the e-book is already in use, take a quick break and try accessing it again after a few minutes.

If you’re experiencing technical difficulties accessing e-books, please get in touch with us via the Problem Report Form.

**Navigating the text in e-books**

Reading an e-book gives you access to features that print versions do not have.

For instance, you can search the text electronically to find key words or phrases.

Think carefully about what you need to search for to make sure that you do not end up with too many results to scan through. It’s a good idea to think about the purpose of your reading before you start - why are you reading this text, what do you already know and what do you need to find out? Deciding on these questions will help you to see what you need to search for, and the best way to find it.

When you find the information you need, remember to read around it so that you can see and understand the context. It's more difficult to get an overview when reading an e-book, so always consider reading the introductory chapter and thinking about the purpose of your reading before you start.

**Taking notes**

You don’t always need a pen and paper when studying from e-books; on many of our e-book platforms you can take notes electronically. These notes will refer back to the page you were reading and include the title of the e-book, which can be a useful way to organise your notes.

You may need to create a personal account (unrelated to your university username and password) to store and/or export your notes but you should usually be able to create and print your notes without such an account.

**Referencing e-books**

Many of our e-book platforms will let you directly export your references to a reference management software, such as Endnote. For more information take a look at the Library’s pages on how to export your references to EndNote.

When referencing please remember to reference the e-book, not the print book as the page numbers won’t always correspond. It may be sufficient to give details as you would for the print copy, but add [e-book] after the title so that it is clear which version you consulted.

For advice on how to reference, see our guide on Citing References.

**Using and evaluating websites**

Can I use websites in academic study?

The short answer is "yes - but you must use them appropriately".

Websites can provide valuable evidence to support your discussion, just like books or paper journals. For instance, many authoritative sources such as academic institutions, government and research bodies, or charities use the internet to make important data available as quickly and freely as possible. Journal articles are also often available online, and an increasing number of journals are only available electronically.

However, unlike academic books and journals which are usually peer-reviewed before being published, websites can potentially be written by anyone. So you do need to spend more time assessing their reliability.

**Important:** Make sure you refer to a variety of sources in your assignments - don't just cite websites, as this demonstrates a very limited range of research. Using a mixture of books,
journals and websites will usually produce the best results.

**Finding online resources**

A straightforward Google search is easy - but it will give you millions of hits, most of which are irrelevant or not at the right level to use in your work. Search thoughtfully to save wasting time.

Choose your search terms carefully. Use speech marks to search for a phrase rather than separate words. Use advanced search features to limit language or year. Consider whether there are synonyms for your search terms that you could also try.

Try a dedicated academic search engine like Google Scholar. This will search peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts and articles. Some of these will be available online or through Reading's subscription to various e-journals. However, note that not everything is listed on Scholar - if you rely solely on it, you may miss something important.

Go straight to a reputable source: the University Library has collated good, reputable academic online resources in each subject area. For a good starting point, see their alternatives to Wikipedia - Online dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other reference sources.

**Evaluating online resources**

Use this checklist adapted from the Library's Evaluating websites to help you judge whether a web resource is reliable and appropriate:

**Authority**

* Who is responsible for the page/site?
* Is it a reliable organisation (e.g. a well known university) or a subject expert?
* Can you trust them?

**Accuracy and reliability**

* Is the information correct?
* Is the grammar and spelling correct?
* Is it complete, or are they just giving one point of view?

* Do they have their own agenda e.g. political organisations?
* Is the information fact or opinion?
* Is the information backed up by evidence? Is the evidence based on research? Is it reliable?

**Currency**

* Can you tell how up-to-date it is?
* Is it regularly updated? You don't want to quote out-of-date information

**Audience / relevance**

* Is the information at the right level to be quoted in your project?

**Feel**

* Is the site well structured and easy to navigate?
* Are the links from the page up-to-date and valid?
* If it is well designed and maintained then you can feel more confident about the information it provides.

It's okay to use Wikipedia – but use it wisely! It isn't usually acceptable to cite Wikipedia as a source in your assignments. Information on Wikipedia can be edited by anyone, so may be unreliable, and it often isn't at the correct level for university work.

However, Wikipedia can provide a brief introduction to a complex topic and give you an overview from which you can then do further in-depth research. You wouldn't cite Wikipedia, but it can get you started thinking about the topic.

**Using and referencing online resources**

You can use authoritative online resources as evidence in the same way that you would use books or journals. But beware - online resources are so easy to find and access that it might be tempting to do all your research on the web. This is not a good idea - there may be a lot of information online, but that doesn't mean it's the most suitable material for your assignment. For instance, a standard search will often produce a lot of newspaper articles that report on and summarise research. Such articles might be good
evidence for an essay on media portrayals of topics, but not appropriate for a scientific literature review. However, the articles might help you find the original research to use directly.

**Tip:** If you use a variety of sources, you can compare and cross-check what you read on websites with what you read in book chapters and journal articles.

*Remember that information published on a website is someone else’s work or ideas, so you will need to add an accurate citation.*

Online resources provide evidence and examples to back up your own points and ideas, so they should be treated like any other source. Reference websites fully and accurately, including the date you accessed the site. Don't forget that visual information (e.g. pictures, photos, diagrams, graphs) from websites also needs to be referenced.

To cite a website in the body of your assignment, use the author's surname or the organisation that has responsibility for the website. If neither of these are obvious, use the title. Add the date the webpage was published (not the date you accessed it):

*Tip:* If you are having difficulty finding the necessary details to reference a webpage, you might need to think about whether it is the kind of material that is academically valid - is it suitable to be used as evidence in your assignment?

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e.g. The 2004 report shows that this figure is increasing (HEFCE, 2004).
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In the bibliography, list as many details as are available from this list in this order: Author, year of publication, title of webpage, URL, date accessed.

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If you can't find a date of publication, use n.d. in place of the year in the citation (stands for no date).

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on **Reading and Making Notes**. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/reading

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice