Reading more effectively, purposefully and efficiently

As you would expect, learning successfully at university also involves learning to read more effectively. The following tips and exercises are designed to help you to: a) manage your reading more effectively; b) read more critically; and c) produce focused and clear notes.

To find out more about how you can use Microsoft OneNote to help manage and organise your notes visit the IT Services OneNote page.

This short video tutorial contains advice and tips on reading and taking notes for your first university assignment.

For further advice and guidance on effective strategies for reading and note-making visit the relevant section of the Succeed in your Studies website.

1) Starting questions: clarifying your purpose for reading

Before you start reading a text for study purposes, you should ask yourself the questions below. They might seem obvious but starting out with these kinds of questions will help you to stay ‘in charge’ of your reading, make better use of the time available and also produce clearer and more useful notes.

a) Why am I reading this? What’s my purpose? For example, is it background to help you get a better overall understanding (in which case it might not be necessary to make very detailed notes) or is it for a specific assignment question (in which case you might want to focus in on particular aspects of the text in more detail)?

b) What are my ‘reading goals’ for this text? To help frame and focus your reading and any notes you make, it’s a good idea to set some specific reading goals linked to your purpose(s). For example: ‘to produce a topic summary to use for revision purposes later on’; ‘to obtain evidence for a particular section of an assignment I’m working on’; ‘to build on my understanding of a topic covered in the lecture’. From this, you can set two or three specific goals to help focus your attention. [The video tutorial linked to above tells you more about this].

c) How much time can/should I give to this text? In many ways, the answer to this question will depend on the answer to the first two questions. One way of managing your reading, though, is to get into the habit of setting realistic time-limits on reading. These will also help you to stay focussed on a text rather than letting your mind wander off to much. Indeed, sometimes a good idea to ‘work against the clock’ doing all you can to ensure you get the reading and note-making done within the specified time! This isn’t necessary in every case, and you shouldn’t rush through texts just for the sake of it, but it can add an extra urgency to the reading which, in turn, can help with motivation and focus. Why not consider rewarding yourself when you meet your reading targets?

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2) Reading activities

Below are some activities that you can adapt for your own purposes. They each share the aim of encouraging you to be more active and task-focussed in both your reading and note-making.

*For the sake of illustration, it has been assumed here that a book chapter is the text in question, but you could use the same activities to help you read a journal article, or other types of sources more effectively.*

**Activity 1:** Consider how you will access the chapter: will you use a hardcopy, or locate an electronic version? How will this affect how you read it and make notes? For example, if you find reading on a backlit screen difficult, can you mitigate this? Can you use a digital reading tool that will allow you to annotate or highlight the text, or would you prefer to do this by hand?

Briefly scan or survey of the chapter as whole, noting its overall structure, any sub-headings, any words or phrases that sound familiar or not etc. This will help give you an overall sense of what the chapter is setting out to do. You don’t need to read it in depth but you do want to gain an overall sense of what the chapter is saying.

Look the opening couple of paragraphs of the chapter. These should help you better understand what the chapter is about and/or trying persuade you to think. If you are reading a digital version, are there any reading tools that might help you, such as using a ‘search’ function to locate key words or adjusting the text to make it more readable?

Digital versions might contain more information than hardcopies – hyperlinks, videos, interactive features, adverts, or supplementary information. From one perspective this can be a helpful way to find more information, but on the other hand, it make it harder for you to find and select the relevant information for your research. Some digital reading tools enable you to switch off advertisements and distractions.

**Activity 2:** Now, before you start to read the chapter proper, come up with a brief set of questions (5-10 maximum). These will help guide both your reading and your notes. The types of questions to consider are:

- Clarifying specialist language questions about the meaning of key words, phrases and concepts you real (e.g. ‘What does the author mean by the phrase..?’)
- Understanding central argument questions about the knowledge claims made/arguments advanced in the chapter (e.g. ‘How does the author distinguish between X and Y..?’)
- Evaluative questions, inviting more critical reflection (e.g. ‘How do you respond to the author’s conclusion that..?’)
- Synoptic questions, inviting more of an overview of chapter as a whole (e.g. ‘How would you summarise, in no more than three sentences, the author’s position on..?’)

**Activity 3:** Now read the chapter more carefully, using your questions to guide you (see the note-making template below). If reading a digital version you should also be able to search the chapter for key words and themes and/or look up the meaning of certain specialist and phrases.
### 3) Note-making template

The following template is designed to help you make notes using the reading activities set out above. To find out more about how you can use *Microsoft OneNote* to help manage and organise your notes visit the [IT Services OneNote page](https://www.le.ac.uk/it_services/onenote).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose for reading this</td>
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<td>My Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Notes</td>
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Quick Summary exercise

If you had to very briefly summarise the main ideas, knowledge, arguments etc. into just three brief points what would they be?

1.

2.

3.