Supporting approaches to reading and note-making: sample exercises and guidelines

These exercises are designed to help support and develop students’ reading and note-making practices and are themselves, in turn, based largely on the guidance and advice commonly provided to students making the transition to HE (see, for example www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies). The main point is rather than merely advising students what to do, we instead build these practices into students’ encounters with reading early in their programmes. Some of these approaches can be used when considering how students can make use of lecture recordings – instead of simply watching recordings in their entirety, students can apply the enquiry-based approaches illustrated here.

Reading as enquiry-based activity

A common and effective approach, already used by colleagues in several departments, is to help students develop more enquiry-based reading practices. This involves modelling the kinds of questions and stances that help readers to engage more actively and critically with academic texts. This should help achieve a number of related objectives, including:

- managing reading tasks more efficiently
- developing more critical relationships with texts
- becoming more selective and discerning in note-making
- provoking deeper-level engagement
- developing ways of managing, collating and structuring notes, either digitally or non-digitally, that help them answer the question
- distinguishing between their own ideas and those of others within their notes – a particular risk when using ‘copy and pasting’ for digital note-making

The following are examples of how initial reading activities might be used to support students in developing more consciously enquiry-based approaches. In each case, it is assumed that the reading is relevant to the module.

Sample reading and note-making task 1

In next week’s seminar, we are going to be discussing Chad Kautzer’s (2010) introductory chapter (pp 1-19) in Radical Philosophy. The activities for this reading task are designed to help you engage more actively with the chapter and to come to the seminar more prepared to take part in the discussions we will be having and the questions we will be posing.

As well as helping you to engage with this chapter, these activities are also designed to help you develop your own question-based approaches to reading. Developing these approaches will help you to manage your reading, and to develop more critical and questioning approaches to your studies in general.
Later in the module, you will have the chance to do this exercise again, only this time, **you will be devising the questions**.

**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 against 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.

Look the opening couple of paragraphs of the chapter. These should help you better understand what the author is setting out to argue and/or 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 read the chapter more carefully. Don’t worry about making detailed notes at this stage, although **do note down any questions you have regarding your understanding**. Are there any words, phrases, concepts etc. you are unsure of and would like explained more fully? Might hyperlinks within a digital version, or an internet search, help provide clarity? Again, remember to be selective and restrict your further reading to only that which helps clarify the word, phrase or concept. Bring your questions along to the seminar so we can discuss them and clarify understanding.

**All questions will be anonymised, so don’t worry about any of your questions seeming ‘too basic’ – it’s likely your questions will help others as well as yourself!**

**Activity 3:** Now you have had a chance to read the chapter and note down any questions, it’s time to start engaging with the questions below. For each of the questions below, make **brief notes in response either on paper or using a digital note-making or writing tool**. We will be discussing responses to these in the seminar so they don’t have to be perfectly formed; just clear enough to capture your thinking. If you’re not sure about any, don’t panic, just note down that you’re unsure and move on.

**Questions:**

(pp. 1-6)
- What does Kautzer mean by the term ‘radical’ where philosophy is concerned and what sets it apart, in his view, from other kinds of philosophy?

(pp. 6-9)
- What different ‘forms of knowing’ did Aristotle identify?
- What effects does Kautzer argue that the European ‘scientific revolution’ had on the forms of knowledge that came to be prioritised and considered most valid?
How does Kautzer summarize Descartes’ ‘famous distinction between mind (cogitans) and matter (extensa)’?

Kautzer describes this so-called dualism of Descartes as a ‘paradigm shift in how we think about the subject and its relationship to the natural world and to the social world.’ What does he mean by this and what evidence does he cite?

What impact does Kautzer argue ‘positivism’ has had on the social sciences?

In this final section, Kautzer refers to the concept of ‘emancipatory praxis’. How would you summarise (in no more than two or three sentences) what he means by this term?

The chapter closes with a brief description of ‘conflict theory’. What does this term mean and what do ‘conflict theories’ set out to help us understand?

The chapter opens with the following quotation from Audre Lorde’s (1984) book, Sister Outsider: ‘When we turn from anger we turn from insight...’ How does the chapter seek to support and qualify this statement? What are your own views on the role of ‘anger’ in seeking to understand the world and produce knowledge about it?

How persuaded were you by the arguments Kautzer presented and why? To help with this, perhaps identify just one or two key arguments to think about in more detail.

Sample reading and note-making task 2

In next week’s seminar, we will be discussing Audre Lorde’s (1984) lecture, ‘The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism’ published in her book of collected essays and speeches, Sister Outsider. This time, though, it’s up to you to devise the questions to help guide your reading and your engagement with the text – digital or hardcopy. The guidelines below should help you do this:

- It’s only a short chapter (10 pages) so limit the number of questions (6-8 maximum should be fine)
- Use different types of questions to encourage different types of engagement (see below)
  - Clarifying specialist language questions about the meaning of key words, phrases and concepts (e.g. ‘What does Lorde mean by the phrase...’)
  - Understanding central argument questions about the claims being made/arguments advanced (e.g. ‘How does Lorde distinguish between...’)
  - Evaluative questions, inviting more critical reflection (e.g. ‘How do you respond to Lorde’s claim 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, Lorde’s position on...’)

Decide how you want to record your notes around these questions, for example, using pen and paper, a digital reading tool or a digital writing tool. In the seminar, as well as discussing your responses to your own questions, we will swap anonymised question sets so that you can revisit the chapter from at least one alternative perspective.
Sample reading and note-making task 3: Note-making from a recorded lecture

In this week’s lecture recording, we considered how birds’ learn to sing and the neuronal pathways that underlie this behaviour. The activities for this independent study task are designed to help you engage more actively with the lecture recording, and to revise and further develop your understanding of the topic area.

As well as helping you to engage with this lecture, these activities are also designed to help you develop your own question-based approaches to learning from recorded material. Developing these approaches will help you to manage your use of lecture recordings, stay ‘in charge’ and develop more critical and questioning approaches to your studies in general.

Later in the module, you will have the chance to do this exercise again, only this time, you will be devising the questions.

Activity 1: Consider how you will access the lecture recordings, what equipment you will need, and where you will do it. Might distractions affect your ability to engage with recording? Should you limit how much time you spend watching recorded lectures to ensure you have time for other activities, or for your own well-being?

Activity 2: Briefly scan or survey the recording as a whole, by using the ‘contents’ tab or flicking through the slides, and note any words or phrases that sound familiar or not etc. This will help give you an overall sense of what the lecture is setting out to do.

Activity 3: Look at how the lecture is introduced – what are the aims and learning outcomes? These should help you better understand what the lecturer is setting out to argue and persuade you to think. Now watch the conclusion of the lecture - what are the important points that the lecturer emphasises? How will your understanding of this topic be assessed? Are there examples of student work or exam questions available either on your blackboard module site or in the library’s exam question archive or dissertation archive?

Activity 4: It’s up to you to devise questions to help guide your viewing of the lecture recording and your engagement with the content. The guidelines below should help you do this:

- Limit the number of questions, and link these to the learning objectives, aims and past exam questions (3-5 maximum should be fine)
- Use different types of questions to encourage different types of engagement (see below)
  - **Clarifying specialist language questions** about the meaning of key words, phrases and concepts (e.g. ‘What does Thorpe mean by the phrase…’)
  - **Understanding central argument questions** about the claims being made/arguments advanced (e.g. ‘How does Thorpe distinguish between…’)
  - **Evaluative questions**, inviting more critical reflection (e.g. ‘How do you respond to Marler’s claim 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, Thorpe’s position on…’)

You can focus on parts of the lecture recording that address your questions. If you do want to watch the entire recording consider controlling the speed that it plays back at, speeding up for less relevant.
information, and slowing down for more helpful information or more challenging concepts. Additionally, you can bookmark useful parts of the recording to return to, or add notes within Panopto. You may want to identify articles, texts or other sources that go into more detail or offer other perspectives on these areas. You can swap your questions, and discuss your answers and conclusions with other students on your module so that you can consider the topic from at least one alternative perspective – either face to face, through social media or using the ‘Discussion’ tab on Panopto.

Sample reading and note-making task 4: Structured reading groups

Academic Reading Circles are a commonly-used method for encouraging students to approach texts from a variety of perspectives and obtain first-hand practise and experience of working with texts in different ways and for different purposes (Seburn, 2016). The ‘structured reading group’ (Parrot and Cherry, 2011) model presented here works on a similar set of principles and has already been applied to good effect at the University of Leicester (see www.le.ac.uk/lli for a case study example). Below is a brief overview of how these work in practice (for a more detailed account of this approach, including student resources to support and encourage engagement, see Parrott and Cherry, 2011).

Reading group task: You will be reading the following article:


Each member of the group will be assigned a different role to play (these are rotating, so you will get a chance to experience all the different roles). The roles are described below (From Parrot and Cherry, 2011. See Appendix A of this article for a more detailed student hand out on roles.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role title</th>
<th>Role description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion leader</strong></td>
<td>‘…to develop at least three possible discussion questions that you can discuss in groups to help everyone understand the main points of the assigned reading… You will also be responsible for facilitating the class discussion.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passage Master</strong></td>
<td>‘…to locate a few special passages that are important in the reading assignment. These may give key information, back up the information given, or summarize the author’s key points. They might also be passages that strike your fancy for some reason, are particularly well written, or might be controversial or contradictory with other passages or other information learned in class…’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creative Connector</strong></td>
<td>‘…to help everyone make connections to other important ideas, both to ideas from this class and also to other cultural, social, political, and economic ideas. You may make connections to other reading assignments, lectures, TV shows, movies, or other experiences…’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Devil’s Advocate</strong></td>
<td>‘…to challenge the ideas in the article by developing a list of critical, thoughtful questions and arguments that might be raised by critics of the authors or by those with different points of view.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporter</strong></td>
<td>‘…the only role that will be prepared during and after class. Your job is twofold. First, during the discussion, you will take notes on the discussion and will summarize its main points… Second, after the discussion you will need to write a brief summary of the group discussion.’</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Your seminar discussions will be based wholly on what you bring along and reports will be posted on the blog area for your reading group. Do you want to try using a digital reading tool that allows you to collaboratively annotate a digital text?

**Sample reading and note-making task 5: Reading for Writing (textual analysis exercise)**

Both of the following exercises are aimed at helping students with reading for writing, but exercise 1 at least can be used purely as a structured reading exercise.

**Exercise 1**

The exercise below is designed to help students understand the difference between analysing a text and describing it. The questions guide the student towards identifying the argument the writer makes and explaining how he justifies his argument. The final section encourages the student to place the writing in its historical and biographical contexts, and to understand how text may be used to illuminate context, as well as context illuminating text.


**Identifying the Argument: The Adventurer, no.85 [The Role of the Scholar]**

1. Read the text fairly briskly for the gist of it without delaying over difficult words or trying to unravel complicated syntax.

2. Reading the text slowly and carefully, write answers to the questions below. For each question comment both on what Johnson writes and what features of his prose help him articulate his point of view (i.e. both content and linguistic features). Answer the questions separately at first but then work the answers into continuous prose using no more than 500 words in total.

   2.1. How does Johnson justify the subject of his essay?

   2.2. How does Johnson disarm the detractors he anticipates?

   2.3. What is the argument Johnson makes for reading and for those who devote themselves to extensive reading?

   2.4. What is the argument Johnson makes for conversation?

   2.5. Why and how does Johnson qualify each of these arguments as he goes along?

   2.6. What argument does Johnson make for writing?

3. **In no more than 300 words** consider reasons – both contextual and biographical – why Johnson might have written an essay expanding on Bacon’s pronouncement. With a suitable linking sentence append this section to the continuous prose response to question 2 above. You should have a short essay with several paragraphs totalling no more than 800 words at the end of this process.
Exercise 2
The exercise below is designed to help students distinguish between analysis and summary. A summary is an attempt to reproduce the author’s argument and point of view in the text as clearly as possible, whereas an analysis is an investigation of the text to reveal the techniques used to achieve its effects. Thus, the summary strives to report the tone of voice of the author and the substance of the text; whereas the voice in the analysis is that of the commentator upon the techniques used in the text and its effects.


Summary versus Analysis: *The Rambler*, no.145 [Journalists]

1. Read the text briskly for the gist.

2. Reading slowly and carefully, write an analysis of Johnson’s argument in this essay in no more than 400 words. The analysis should be in continuous prose, but should take into account the following:
   2.1. How does Johnson present his argument both in terms of strategy and the language he uses?
   2.2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the argument’s structure and/or logic?
   2.3. What might some of the adjectives Johnson uses reveal about his attitudes to the subject or the attitudes of his readership to it – or both? What can be detected about the tone of the essay?
   2.4. How persuasive is the essay, and why?

3. Summarise Johnson’s essay in no more than 400 words. Remember that a summary should follow the structure of the original and present its argument faithfully. Details and elaborations should be left out.

References
