

Reading effectively

Trying to balance comprehension with efficiency

Tertiary level reading is complex and demanding, so it's essential to develop strategies for reading effectively.

Remember that comprehension, or the understanding of difficult material, always takes time. Don't get too anxious if at the start of semester you only understand around 60% of what you are reading. By immersing yourself in the subject matter through reading, listening in lectures and discussing in tutorials you will increase your familiarity with new terms and concepts. This means that your comprehension will improve.

Comprehending a text accurately is the first step of the reading process at tertiary level. Familiarising yourself with reading strategies will not only improve your comprehension skills but also help you in meeting the demands and complexity of your courses and content.

Do not be fooled by commercial speed-reading courses. These courses tend to focus on making your eyes move more quickly over the page. However, such training takes time and practice, and does not necessarily make you think more quickly or improve your comprehension. In other words, as your speed increases, your comprehension could decrease.

Instead, try to develop reading strategies like those listed below to enable you to read efficiently and effectively.

Finding a focus or purpose

It is important to have a focus or purpose before you begin reading. You are likely to read more efficiently if you have specific questions in mind before you begin to read. Writing down some questions in your notebook before you start reading will focus your mind, and give you something to refer back to if you get distracted.

If you concentrate on your purpose for reading both your speed and comprehension could increase.

Your tutorial and lecture guides may indicate questions and critical issues to focus on. If you are reading for an essay, brainstorming the essay topic with your friends should give you some questions to help you focus.

Sometimes your teachers will give you a purpose for reading a text. They might expect you to be critical of a text, to apply what you have read to another situation, or to compare one text to another. See the Academic Skills flyer 'Reading Critically' for more about reading with purpose.

Surveying the text

Once you have established what you are reading and why you are reading it, you might want to conduct a short survey of the text. At the tertiary level, you can expect to read textbooks, journal articles, reports and case studies. The types of texts you will be required to read will vary based on your faculty and field of study. A survey of the text will give you a sense of how it is structured, what content is covered, and what sections you need to read in detail.

Tips for surveying a text

Surveying a book or journal article could take as little as 5 minutes depending on the length and your purpose for reading. The main purpose of the survey is to determine how the text is organised; which sections you need to read in more detail; and which sections you can skim or even skip.

When surveying:

- Use your research question or course outline to prioritise the reading. Establish which sections should be read first and in what level of detail.
- Note the **author, title, date** and **publisher**
- Check the table of contents or index for relevant sections or pages
- Read the abstract if available
- Read the introductory paragraph(s) or chapter for relevant information
- Read the conclusion
- Skim through the text, looking at:
 - chapters, headings and subheadings
 - diagrams / graphs / charts / illustrations and their captions
 - endnotes, appendices, list of references
- Skim read the first and last sentence in each paragraph, which most likely contain the main points of the paragraph
- Scan for particular facts and figures
- If you are reading to answer questions, scan for the answers by locating key words and reading the text around those key words.

Acquiring vocabulary

It is important when embarking on a new course or subject that you take careful note of the vocabulary central to the discipline. It may be helpful to build a system for learning new words.

Tips for learning new vocabulary

- During pre-reading, look for frequently used, but unfamiliar, words and expressions. Make a note of them and look their meaning up before you re-read the text.
- A book index (or a glossary) can often help you find definitions for the specialist terms it uses; or you could use a subject-specific dictionary.
- Develop your own system to record these words, their meanings and the context in which they appear.
- Try using the words in your writing and while participating in lectures and tutorials.

Engaging with the author

An effective reader engages in an 'active dialogue' with the author. This means you should comment and question the text in the same way you would in a conversation. The Academic Skills Flyer *Active Learning* offers other strategies to engage with your text.

Tips for engaging with the author

Interacting with the author can keep your mind from wandering. It also allows for an active reading style by giving facts and ideas a purpose. The following tips will give a purpose to your reading:

- Think about what the author is really saying; what is the underlying message?
- Criticise or question the authors' ideas
- Check that the author is correct; cross reference ideas
- Relate what the author is saying to your own experience

Example: **Author:** *Your reading speed is adjustable – you can change your speed to suit your purpose.*

Reader: *Is this true? It could be the author's opinion. Although it is true for me, it may not be for everyone. I don't read every word in the newspaper. In fact, I read newspapers quickly and textbooks at a slow and steady speed.*

Improving comprehension

A text may be difficult because it uses a structure that is unfamiliar to you, draws on technical vocabulary that you have not yet acquired, or addresses abstract concepts and ideas that are new to you. This is going to happen especially when reading a complex text. Using strategies to overcome complex texts can improve your ability to comprehend and recall what you have read.

Tips for improving comprehension

You can improve your comprehension and retention of the material by making notes, making an outline, or drawing diagrams of the material as you read.

To read more easily:

- **Put down your highlighter!** Make notes in the margin instead of highlighting. For example you can write a one-line summary of the paragraph, write follow-up questions, agree or protest or write down keywords to help you recall an important point
- **Teach what you learned to someone else.** Trying to explain aloud what you have read will help your brain to transfer the knowledge from your short-term to long term memory and you will have a better understanding of what you do and do not understand.
- **Write a summary** of a journal article or chapter in your own words.
- **Use headings and important information to make up questions** about the text as you are reading. Try to answer these questions when you have finished reading

Going beyond the prescribed reading

Your course outline will sometimes list prescribed texts for your subject. These are texts that your teachers expect you to read before lectures and tutorials *i.e.* your compulsory reading. By reading these texts you will have a better understanding about what the lecturer is talking about. Additionally, there are sometimes recommended or supplementary texts. These texts are optional and are meant to enrich your understanding of the subject.

However, if the theoretical perspectives or key concepts on which the material is based are unfamiliar, you may need to explore some of the references that the writer(s) cites in the text and at the end of the paper/book. Alternatively, you may need go back to a more basic textbook which explains them.

Works Cited

Marshall, L., & Rowland, F. (1998). A guide to learning independently (3rd ed.), Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.

McGraw for Undergraduates (2008). Active reading strategies. Retrieved July 14, 2011 from <http://www.princeton.edu/mcgraw/library/for-students/remember-reading/>.

Further Resources

Active Reading Comprehension and Rate (2011) Retrieved July 14, 2011 from <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/success/reading.html>

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