

Reading effectively

What to read and where to find reading matter

The first stage is preparation

Reading techniques

The SQ3R method

Reading difficult material

Making notes

Checklist

For further information and the full range of study guides go to:
<http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn>

What to read and where to find reading matter

There are many different types of reading material available: magazines, the internet, newspapers, journals, novels and textbooks, to name a few. You will need to consult a variety of these sources to fulfil the requirements of your degree. Although you are not necessarily expected to read everything on your reading lists, nonetheless you will have to read a great deal of material, and so may need to improve your proficiency.

The type of material you choose will depend upon the purpose for reading it. For example, you may read in order to find a particular piece of information, or to get an overview of the subject in order to write a literature review, or to find out how to do something. Different reading techniques will be useful at different times, so being clear about the purpose for reading will determine which reading technique you choose.

The first stage is preparation

Preparation is very important and involves being selective about your reading and finding material which is suitable; refer to your module reading list or tutor for appropriate texts. Use MetaLib (the Plymouth University's e-library catalogue) to explore a wide range of additional sources to those included in the reading list.

Start by making a plan to determine what you already know and what you need to find out. This might be a set of questions developed using the critical thinking model (in the critical thinking study guide). If you find reading hard at first, break it up into small

manageable chunks and gradually increase these as you become more efficient.

You don't need to read everything cover to cover. Scan your sources first to determine how much attention to give them. Be selective by checking the organisational features, such as the title page, table of contents, index, headings, abstract, conclusion and bibliography, and prioritise the publications that will be most useful. When you think you have found a relevant text, skim it or ladder read it to get an overview before deciding whether to read it in depth. Several fast readings may give you a better understanding than one slow reading.

Reading techniques

There are a number of basic techniques in the table below that are useful for different purposes, depending on what you want from the source. Using these techniques will ensure that you are reading actively as well as quickly. This will help you glean the most relevant information and build on your knowledge and understanding recall at a later date.

Figure 1: Reading techniques

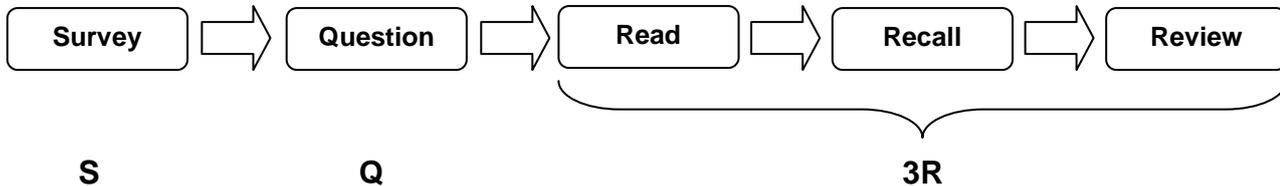
What you want to achieve...	Reading technique...	What is involved...
Locate specific information	Scanning	Searching the text looking for key words and phrases e.g. using the telephone directory
Gain a general overview	a) Skimming b) Ladder reading	a) Moving your eye quickly over the text, not necessarily from top left to bottom right b) Reading subheadings, beginnings and endings of paragraphs and/or sections
Revision; consolidating existing knowledge	Rapid	Moving a pointer perhaps down the right hand margin will help move your eye quickly over the page
Develop full understanding; retrieve detailed information	In-depth	Careful, slow and repetitive reading while taking notes; requires a high level of concentration
Assess and evaluate information and ideas	Critical	Questioning and analysing to determine the author's purpose
Proofreading	Intensive	Thorough reading, checking spelling, punctuation and sentence structure; requires a high level of concentration e.g. a legal contract
Read for background information	Extensive	Reading large amounts in a single session. e.g. a novel

You will need to learn to vary your reading style to suit both the material and your reason for reading that material and you will need to develop the ability to quickly switch from one method of reading to another. Good planning and strategic reading will save you time in the long run.

The SQ3R method

Rowntree (1976) discusses a systematic reading strategy called SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recall, and Review) which combines the use of these techniques. This strategy is particularly useful when you need to study a topic in depth in order to master it and when revising and making revision notes.

Figure 2: SQ3R



Begin by surveying the text – check the organisational features, layout, subheadings, etc. – this helps you find what you need from the text more quickly. Question what you already know before reading in-depth. Be clear about what you want from the text – decide what question(s) you need to answer and keep them in your head while you read. Next, read, but pick only a manageable ‘chunk’ at a time – a paragraph or smaller. Before you make notes, put the text aside and see if you can recall what you have read. Is it useful? If it is, make notes, then look again to review. If not, go on to the next ‘chunk’.

Using these reading techniques will, with practice, enable you to improve the speed of your reading. However, it is pointless to read many texts and gain little comprehension. Aim to read effectively first, improving your understanding, and then more quickly.

Other reading techniques

Reading aloud and recording it to listen to again can be a good strategy for some learners, although may take extra time.

Formulate a list of questions with which to interrogate the text. For example, what key arguments are the authors putting forward? Why? How valid are they? What conclusions have they drawn? How? Why?

Reading difficult material

You may come across material which you must read but which you find difficult. Start with the simplest texts to get a basic understanding. Read the title and the first paragraph and look for the main ideas. Look up difficult words and make use of the web and reference books. With practice your reading will improve as you become more familiar with the specialised vocabulary and academic style of writing.

Making notes

Reading and note-making are closely linked, and the quality of your notes will certainly be reflected in the overall quality of the academic work that you produce, such as essays and your answers to exam questions. The point of reading is not to commit the whole text to memory, but to understand the main principles. Being creative with your notemaking can help this, so that more than just making a record, you are fully processing material as you go. There are many different ways of making notes, some more successful than others, and you need to find a system that works for you as both a recording and a learning process. Linear notes but especially visual notes can help you to work out the interconnections between key points and ideas. Remember to always include references with your notes.

The final stages of the reading process include reflecting on what you have read and the notes you have made; re-reading it/them for clarification and increased understanding; reformulating for commitment to memory; and revising for recall.

Checklist/tips

- Plan your reading into manageable chunks
- Pick the best time of day and the best place to read
- Be selective; ensure the material is relevant
- Practice using a range of techniques to improve proficiency
- Start with a pen in your hand
- Make notes on the important points/arguments
- Keep track of references in your notes
- Reflect and re-read to ensure understanding
- Read aloud when proofreading, starting from the end

References

Fairbairn, G. (2001) *Reading at university, a guide for students*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Rowntree, D. (1976) *Learn how to study*. London: Macdonald and Jane's.

University of Hull (2009) *Study Guide Advice Centre*. Available at: www.hull.ac.uk/studyadvice (Accessed: 5th May 2009)

Learning Development
www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn
learn@plymouth.ac.uk
Learning Gateway, RLB 011
01752 587676

Tutorials
Drop-in Zone
Taught sessions
Peer Assisted Learning Scheme
Online support