



Effective Reading

Would you like to know how to read University material more effectively and efficiently? Do you want to understand the material better? How do you read actively?

University reading

Reading material at tertiary level may require you to change some of your past reading habits. In the course of your study, you will have a lot of readings for your respective papers. Since you will not have time to, or need to, read everything given to you, it is important that you become an effective and efficient reader!

Improving your reading skills means learning how to be an active and critical reader, developing your vocabulary in the subject, learning what to read, and learning how much to read. Reading is not about just stringing together the words on your page, but really working to understand the meaning of the text by actively analysing the material. This may seem difficult at first, but stick with it and you will benefit greatly.

What to read?

When you are preparing to read, remember that you want to be efficient since reading can eat up many hours of your precious study time. Depending on the papers you are taking, you may not need to read all the material provided, but how do you know what and how much to read?

There are three sources available to answer this question: Your lecturer or tutor, your notes, and your reading list. However, it may not be necessary to read all of the references recommended by these sources, so you must be the judge of what materials are most relevant to your lecture or assignment. Scanning the reading for keywords or phrases will help you to identify important information. The table of contents is also a useful place to start.

To effectively scan a text:

- Establish what you already know and what questions you want to answer;
- Write down key words or phrases you want to look for;
- Scan the text to find where important information is (just like you scan a newspaper).

Approaches to reading

You must adjust your approach to reading depending on your needs. For example, if you are reading to get a broad overview of the material, you can quickly scan read. However, if you are reading for comprehension, you will read more slowly and thoroughly.

Before you begin reading, ask yourself, “Why am I reading this?”

What is the purpose? What questions do I want answered?

Depending on your purpose, you may choose several approaches to reading:

Overview reading:

Reading quite rapidly, finding and noting the main themes or points, and forming an overall impression. This is not reading for detail or complete understanding.

Reading for central ideas:

Reading to familiarise yourself with the central ideas in the material. First get a quick overview, then read more slowly so that the structure of the material and its central theme become clear.

Reading for an in-depth understanding:

Actively reading to understand the meaning of the material. Begin by overviewing the material, then reading in more detail, section by section, taking notes in your own words as much as possible and/or underlining. Attempt to uncover the structure and argument of the reading.

It is easy to see why you need to know the purpose of your reading so that you know how much and how quickly you should be reading.

The “SQ3R” reading technique

There are various strategies for reading which can help you to overcome the challenges associated with reading. Here’s an example of one called SQ3R:

- **Survey:** Quickly look through the material you are going to read to get an overview of where you are headed.
- **Question:** Spending a few minutes thinking of questions that will help you to understand the material.
- **Read:** Now read! Try to actively read (see our tip sheet on note-taking) by testing yourself on the information, making notes, underlining, and drawing diagrams.
- **Recite:** See if you can explain the material to yourself or someone else. This helps to solidify concepts and identifies areas where you need to do more work.
- **Review:** Review often. This is an integral part of learning and applying new material.

Online resources about reading techniques are available on the Student Learning Centre website. The Student Learning Development also runs workshops on Effective Reading. Check out our website to register: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/hedc/students/workshop/>

Want more information? Why not browse through some of our other handy booklets? We have a great section on *Reading Strategies in “Effective Study Techniques”*