Some tips for reading effectively

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Reading at university
While you are at university you will have a lot of reading to do. You can save yourself a lot of time if you can read efficiently and effectively. One of the first things you should know is that you don’t have to read every word of everything you are asked to read. You can start to narrow your reading down by asking yourself ‘what am I reading this for?’. When you ask yourself this question you are really asking things like:

- am I reading for general background information?
- what specific information am I looking for?
- how am I going to use the information I am reading?
- am I reading to prepare for an exam?

The reason you are reading something influences how you go about reading. When you read for different purposes you read differently. Take a minute to think about all the things you read in the course of a week and the media you read from.

You will have come up with quite a variety of things that you read. Do you read them all the same way? The correct answer is no. The same principle applies to the reading you do for your studies. Once you work out what you are reading adjust how you go about reading.
Getting ready to read

Before you even start reading you can make the job easier by getting prepared. Before you start reading in detail try taking the following three steps:

1. Look at the text you are going to read. Ask yourself. What is its title? Is it a book, a chapter, a journal article? Who is the intended audience? (see Reading critically Quick Guide)
2. Ask yourself about the author or authors. Is the author an authority in the area? Are they likely to be biased or pushing a particular agenda?
3. Check to see there is a contents page or an abstract. The contents page of a book will help you to see which, if any, parts of the book are relevant to you. The abstract of an article is a brief summary of the main points of the article. It will tell you if the article is likely to be relevant or not.

If you can it’s a good idea to get together with some other students to pool your ideas and brainstorm. If you are an external student this is more difficult but you can use the Discussion area of a unit’s Blackboard site to ask questions and swap information with fellow students.

Any background knowledge you have will help you when it comes to reading.

Use how the text is structured to help you

There are many ways that the texts you need to read are structured. For example, they might be explaining how something happens, comparing and contrasting things, arguing the case for some proposition, breaking some phenomenon down into its parts or classifying things according to types. A long article might be doing several of these jobs. All these jobs use language in different ways and they are different because they are doing different jobs. As you read you should be asking yourself what job is this text doing? The job it is doing will have a big influence on how it is put together.

Although these texts are all put together differently they all do have some things in common. They all use the most common pattern for how English organises flows of information. English tends to put the most important information at the beginnings and ends of things. For example, the beginning of a chapter will generally tell you what that chapter is going to be about and the end of the chapter will summarise what the chapter has been about. Likewise the topic sentence of a paragraph will tell the reader what the paragraph is going to be about and often a summary sentence will tell the reader what the most important point of the paragraph was.

This pattern repeats itself in the language at different scales. So, the place to start your reading is by reading the beginnings and ends of things. If, for example, you are reading a chapter, read the introductory section first, then read the final section before you dive into the details. Work your way in by reading the beginning and end of each section and sub-section.
Reading for assignments

One good strategy when you read for assignments is to start off general and then move into more specific information. Before you start reading you should think about (and talk about if possible) what you already know about the assignment topic. When you start reading the first thing you read when you prepare for an assignment should be the relevant part of your textbook. You do this because the textbook will give you good, solid background information. This information will help you to make more sense of the more specialised, focussed information that you will find in something like a journal article. First you get a general idea of the big picture and then you focus in on the details.

After you have read the relevant part of your textbook look carefully at the reading list for the unit or, if there is one, the list of suggested readings for the assignment. Again use the principle of moving from general to specific. The more information you know when you start reading highly specific articles the easier it will be for you to understand them.

If you have worked your way through the readings for the assignment and still need more sources start looking for some of the sources that are referred to most often in the readings. These will be written by key researchers in the field.

How to read effectively

Skimming

Skimming is a way of reading where you basically give something a quick once-over so that you decide whether you will read it in detail later. When you skim you read quickly, looking for main points. A good way to skim is to use the technique outlined above of looking at the beginnings and ends of things. Also look at headings and sub-headings. This will give you a quick idea of what the article is generally about.

Scanning

Scanning is similar to skimming except that when you scan you are usually looking for a particular piece of information, like a key word. Scanning, therefore, is more tightly focussed than skimming. You can still apply the same principles as with skimming but you are usually looking for something in particular rather than just looking.

Reading in detail

Once you have decided that an article is useful for your assignment you can now start to read in more detail. When you do this don’t read one word at a time, move your eyes forwards and backwards to fill in gaps. You want to build up a picture of what the whole text means, not just know what each word means. Often you can work out what a word means by reading the words around it. The context can give you a lot of hints. If you have already prepared for reading and skimmed the text you should not find anything that is completely unfamiliar to you or which does not connect to something you already know.
Levels of comprehension

When you read something in detail you can test how much you understand what you have read by applying three tests for comprehension. Ask yourself:

• Do I understand what the writer actually says? This is called literal comprehension. This involves being able to recall some of the actual words the writer has used and being able to re-tell the ‘story’ of an article.

• Can I read between the lines of what the writer is saying? That is, can you make inferences about what something might mean apart from just the literal wording? This is called interpretive comprehension.

• Can I read beyond this specific text and make associations with other things I know about the subject? This is called applied comprehension.

When an assignment is marked you will generally do better if you can demonstrate interpretive and applied comprehension.

Related Quick Guide

Reading critically

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