

Reading – the essentials.

Reading effectively is about choosing the best strategy for the situation, which will vary according to the purpose. There is no right or wrong way to read but considering the purpose and what you want to achieve before you start reading will help you to manage your study time well.

General tips:

- Choose a reading environment based on what works for you to keep your attention. Try a quiet, calm environment. Doesn't work? Choose a busier place, like a cafe. Doesn't work? Try a study group with friends.
- Minimise distractions – you may want to try:
 - Switching your phone to silent, and check it during regular break times, perhaps every 30 minutes.
 - Disconnecting from the internet while reading.
 - Ditch digital: read a traditional book and take notes on paper.
 - Using your headphones to tune out what's going on around you. Music without words is often best for concentration or try a white noise soundtrack.
- Develop strategies to cope with interruptions: you could make a note of what you were thinking or where you were reading when you get interrupted so you can get started again quickly.

Reading Strategies:

If you want to read more effectively explore a range of strategies and choose a method that suits your needs. Here we present three approaches based on identifying your reason for reading; each has a number of methods to help you use your time effectively.

1. I need to find out if this source going to be useful to me...

Recommended reading methods:

Scan: Looking for something specific, such as a definition, a piece of data, a name, or an example.

How to do it: Treat this like a word search puzzle, not reading; Start from the bottom of the page and going backwards; look for defining characteristics like an unusually long word, capital letters, numbers, etc - anything that stands out.

Skim read: Reading quickly, skipping around and not reading every word to get a sense of what the text is about; to understand the gist or main point.

How to do it: Look over the text e.g. at titles, subheadings, and pictures or graphs; find frequently repeated key words; read the first sentence of every paragraph.

Read online: Skimming or scanning information; deciding whether you need to read it intensively later.

How to do it: Use the 'find' or search options in online documents to locate specific keywords or sections.

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Annotate: Making notes, underlining, highlighting or commenting on the text that you are reading. Can be done online as well as on paper. Remember not to do it in library books.

How to do it: Reflect on the main point for each paragraph, page or section after reading it, and only highlight those; add questions you have, or links to other relevant sources.

2. I need to identify the main, arguments, themes and ideas in this source...

Recommended reading methods:

Read critically: Looking for the author's argument and not accepting what they say as fact; questioning and challenging what you are reading.

How to do it: Identify the argument, evidence and interpretation; compare and contrast two sources on the same topic for similarities and differences; evaluate the quality of the evidence and argument; identify any assumptions being made.

Read on paper: Reading a traditional book or chapter on paper encourages you to follow the author's argument in a linear way.

How to do it: Take notes separately as you read; use the contents page (beginning) and index (at the end) to find the sections most relevant to you; read those, plus the introduction, rather than attempting the whole book (unless it's all useful).

3. I need detailed information about a subject, idea or theme – what does this source add?

Recommended reading methods:

Read intensively: Line-by-line, reading intensively or carefully every single word in the text.

How to do it: Take your time; make a note (just a tick or a cross) about what you understand and what you don't.

Question: Ask specific questions that you need to answer from your reading.

How to do it: Skim read the text to get the gist, then write your questions; use your module outline and lecture notes to help write questions; read more carefully to answer questions.

Make notes: Summarise and put notes in your own words; use shorthand, abbreviations and symbols. Note key examples, details and other relevant support that might be useful for you later.

How to do it: Can be on PC or by hand on paper, or by dictation on phone or laptop; keep direct quotations brief and only use where necessary; label your notes with full reference information and develop a system to organise them.

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Further reading and resources:

[Reading skills for university study](#): OpenLearn free short course with lots of useful tips.

[How to read: SQ3R](#): guidance on this widely used technique from the Royal Literary Fund.

[Reading and research strategies](#): The Study Space is an online resource provided by the publishers of the Study Skills Handbook, which is available [online](#).