READ EFFECTIVELY

Overwhelmed by all the reading you have to do?

Active, engaged reading is one key to reading academic texts effectively.

What is active reading?
It includes annotating the text (if it’s yours) not just highlighting sections you think are important.

The reasons why you annotate will vary but make sure you clear about your purpose for reading. Is it to understand better a particular theory or methodology, to find evidence or examples for an assignment, etc?

Annotations may include comments on:
- the author’s theoretical perspective,
- the author’s argument and central claims,
- the appropriateness, strengths and weaknesses of the evidence,
- the logic of the argument,
- the author’s biases,
- parts of the text you don’t understand or need to follow up.

When reading, you become more engaged if you
- examine your own thinking, biases and prejudices about the topics you are studying,
- compare the claims made in one text with those made in others,
- relate what you are reading to your own experiences and reading in previous texts,
- make your own evaluation of the text.

Key point 1
Have a specific purpose for each reading session and write it down.

Find a clear purpose
Before you begin reading a text, determine whether you are reading to
- understand a new theory or model,
- answer a specific question,
- work out the central question, etc.

Effective strategies
Before reading closely
1. Note the bibliographic details of all texts you take notes from as soon as you start reading.
2. Skim read the abstract, introduction, conclusion, subheadings and information in boxes for an overview of the article, book chapter etc.
3. Decide if the text suits your purpose. If no, move to the next article. If yes...
4. Select the sections you need to read more closely.
5. Read those sections.

While reading
- Follow the active reading suggestions in the previous column.
- Paraphrase the main ideas, evidence, explanations etc. as you take notes. Make sure you have all the bibliographic details including page numbers.
- Check your understanding of new definitions, terminology, concepts.
- Evaluate the argument, the evidence, the logic etc. in relation to your purpose.

After reading
- Paraphrase the main ideas.
- Determine how the new perspective agrees with or differs from other authors’ viewpoints.
- Decide if you need to read more to understand the model, theory, framework etc.
- Determine what information you can use in your assignment.

Thinking and notes 3
Key point 2

Know how long you can read for effectively before you need to take a break. The more advanced you are in your studies, the longer you will be able to read without taking a break.

Keep in mind
- Reading academic texts involves reading with a critical eye. It is time-consuming and you need to set aside uninterrupted time to do it effectively.
- Once you fall behind in your reading, it is difficult to catch up so set aside time each day to read for your various units.
- You may have to read a text a number of times to understand it fully and to apply the ideas in it effectively to your assignment.
- It is time-efficient to record full bibliographic details as soon as you begin taking notes from your readings.
- It is useful to know your learning style. Find out what works best for you. Is mind mapping better than linear note-taking? Use a variety of methods.

Remember: The more senses you use when studying, the more likely you are to retain the information you read.

FAQs
Q: What if I don’t understand some key theories and models in the set text?
A: Find another book that covers the same information. It will probably explain things in a different way. Discuss your understanding of the text with others. Get their ideas.

Q: Why does it take me so long to read a book chapter or an article?
A: If you are studying at uni you need to accept that reading complex information and/or new theories and models takes time. Remember to have a specific purpose for each reading session. Using the strategies outlined in this Survival Guide may help you become more engaged in your reading. You may even end up enjoying texts which at first you thought were “too hard” or “too boring”.

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