

READING AT UNIVERSITY – HOW and WHY are you reading?

THINKING ABOUT *HOW* YOU READ

New students at university are sometimes shocked at *how much* reading they are required to do, as well as the *complexity* of some academic texts. For these reasons learning to read effectively is important.

Reading actively

Sometimes we ‘tune out’ when engaged in routine tasks like driving. The same can happen also when you read – you get to the end of the chapter and realise that your mind was elsewhere for the last 8 pages – your mind switched off. Reading effectively at university requires you to be ‘active’ in the reading process – to engage with the ideas and avoid passively accepting information. Get into the habit **as you read** of asking questions and making connections. Questions you might ask as an active reader include:

- How does this relate to:
 - what I already know about the topic?
 - what I have heard in my lectures and tutorials?
 - what I have read in other sources?
- Is it consistent with my beliefs and understandings in relation to the topic?
- How is this similar to or different from what I have read elsewhere?

Asking these types of questions helps you to identify CONNECTIONS, CONTRASTS and CONTRADICTIONS between different sources. Noting these is often important in your academic writing. It is also important in the process by which you start to develop a ‘position’ or ‘argument’ in relation to the topic.

Reading purposefully

“Reading is an attempt by you to interpret what a [text] is saying from your own standpoint and from that of the essay question you are attempting to answer” (Taylor, 1989, pp. 52-53).

Think about why you are reading a particular text. Is it to gain an overview of the topic? Deepen your understanding of core concepts/issues? Find specific information? Locate reasons and examples to support your key argument/contention? Explore alternative perspectives? Being clear about your purpose in reading will help you determine how much time and energy to invest in the particular text. It will also help you to think strategically about if, and how you can use ideas from the text in your own writing.

Reading selectively (and strategically)

It is not possible to read everything available on a topic, and often not necessary to read a text from start to finish. You constantly make decisions about *what* to read, *how much* to read and *what parts* to read. Reading selectively is an important skill which will help you to get the greatest value from your reading. It requires you to consider what sources, and what parts of sources, are most relevant to your particular topic and task.

Reading analytically

When you read analytically you *analyse* the text. This requires you to identify key parts, including the argument or contention, supporting evidence and reasons, examples and key findings and conclusions. It also requires you to consider what the key ideas are, and whether they are clearly explained and logically developed. Analysis of the text helps you to develop a deeper understanding of how the text addresses the topic. Based on this analysis you can begin to make judgements on the strengths and weaknesses of the text, and the extent to which key arguments are convincing and adequately supported. Analysis of the text is therefore the first stage in critical evaluation of it.

Reading critically

Reading critically means that you evaluate the author's ideas and argument as you read, rather than simply accepting them. It does not mean that you seek to criticise, but it does mean that you make **judgements**, based on the evidence, support and explanations provided by the author. Some students find it hard to question 'established knowledge', in the form of academic publications and information provided by lecturers, but thinking and reading critically are important academic skills. Some questions you can ask yourself in order to read critically include:

- Is the central argument or contention clearly expressed?
- Is the topic well-researched?
- Is information from academically credible sources?
- Is the evidence convincing?
- Are supporting ideas provided?
- Does it take account of current knowledge on the topic?
- Are the ideas consistent?
- Have alternative explanations been considered?
- Have limitations been acknowledged?
- Are the findings and/or conclusions reasonable, based on the evidence provided?

Other resources

- Reading at uni – Getting started
- Reading at uni – Critical thinking
- Reading at uni – Critiquing research
- Monash University Language and Learning Online - Reading
<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/reading/index.xml>

References

Greetham, B. (2008). *How to write better essays* (2nd ed.). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
Taylor, G. (1989). *The student's writing guide*. New York, US: Cambridge University Press.