

 **SAGE Study Skills**

Essential Study Skills

The Complete Guide to
Success at University

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4th Edition

companion
website 



4 How to Survive Academic Reading

Okay – so you are worried about the reading – that just makes you normal. We're not born knowing how to tackle a university textbook or journal ... This chapter is designed to sort out academic reading for the worried student – with very practical guidelines about how to manage your reading throughout your time at university.

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Introduction

'With the web, I'm surfing websites, on YouTube, engaging in Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn ... And I still didn't know how to read for university!'

In the UK you are not *taught* your degree, you *read for* your degree: that is, you are supposed to read to learn for your degree. Yes, you are given information in lectures, classes, seminars and tutorials, but this will never be 'all you need to know' on a subject. You are supposed to build on what you are told – and you do that by reading. Lots of it.

Reading is hardest when we first start to study a new topic. Everything feels new and uncertain. You don't know what the subject is *about* – or what is important. You're not sure who to read – or why. You don't know whether to read something really difficult or to 'cheat' and try something easy ... and you're worried that it will only get harder. That's why reading makes so many people – not just you – uncomfortable.

'I don't know what I'm reading or why. I hate this.

So what on earth does 'Read around the subject' mean then?

What are the basic things that I ought to know and understand? Who are the people that I ought to read?

How much of my reading list must I cover?

Can I use Wikipedia? The tutor says no – but it's so helpful!

The secret to successful reading is to know what you are reading – and why. And, no matter how bad you think you are at academic reading, know this – as time goes on, whilst the texts (books, chapters and articles) themselves get harder – because we start to know more, the reading itself becomes easier.

Tip

Read with the assignment question in mind. Share the reading with your peers. Keep a notebook of *all* your reading. Read Wikipedia – but don't *only* read Wikipedia.

Reading: key ideas and people

'I sat there reading this critical theory book on Hardy, and I said to my mate, 'I don't understand any of this!'. Luckily for me he said, 'Don't worry, you will'. If he'd said anything else, I might have given up – but he was right.'

The first reading you do at university is designed to introduce you to the key ideas, people and principles of your subject. After that you will move on to the more difficult ideas and theories – and you will be expected to use what you read when you answer your assignment questions. You should always read more than one source on a topic – and weigh up what the different people say.

For example, if this is the first study skills book that you have ever read, this subject might be new to you. But if you now pick up another study skills book and go to their section on reading, you will be able to see what they write. If it is different from this, you might ask yourself why. This might prompt you to look at yet another study skills book to see what they say – and so on.

This is the basic principle of academic reading. You start reading to gain an understanding – you then develop that by reading more and by reading what different people have to say on the same topic. You start to notice arguments for one point of view – and arguments for a completely different point of view. You engage analytically and critically with all your reading and you develop your knowledge and understanding as you bring the differing arguments together in your own mind. This is where your writing comes in. As you read, start writing potential paragraphs for your assignments – trying to bring different arguments together, for example:

'Burns and Sinfield (2016) argue that academic reading is ... However, Bloggs and Brown (2011) make a case for reading as ...'

manage that so I thought I'd just bluff it a bit you know.

But later on I found from you that I didn't need to do that. When you did that bit about reading – about books. I mean I wasn't aware that I didn't know anything about that first page bit, about this is the author and this is when it was published and this is where it was published. I didn't know any of that. I didn't have a clue because books have always been really alien to me you know?

And when you showed us about looking in the index and looking in the contents and then finding the bit that interests you and then going to your first paragraph and reading the first few lines and seeing if it's what you want. I found that really valuable.'

We have argued that you need to know why you are reading for it to make any sense to you at all. Here we are going to elaborate on that with an active and interactive reading strategy designed to help you make the most of all your academic reading. We have summed it up as QOOQRRR: question, overview, overview, question, read, re-read and review.

Q: Question – think first: what do I already know on this subject? What do I need from this reading?

O: Overview – your course: read your module aims and learning outcomes – read the assignment question: these all tell you why you are reading!

O: Overview – the book, chapter or journal: this will tell you what you are reading!

Q: Question – So, in the light of all that, ask yourself: *Why am I reading this, now?*

R: Read the text actively and interactively – marking it up as you go. Underline, highlight, circle key words or points – make notes in the margin: who would agree or disagree? What does it remind you of? Where will you use the information?

R: Re-read your own annotations and marginalia – now you are ready to make your key word/key point notes.

R: Review your notes – are they any good (are they sourced: author (date) *title*, place of publication: publisher)? Can you use them? What will you now read or write?

QOOQRRR in more detail

First, *question*: ask yourself, what do I already know on this topic? What do I need to find out? Survey or *overview* your module handbook again: what is the assignment question? What are the module aims and learning outcomes? These tell you *why* you are reading.

Then, get the *overview* of the text you are reading – what is it about? You should always know *what* you are reading before you start: read the author and date – is

Attitudes to reading

‘That week when you did that reading session I hated that and I was really uncomfortable the whole lesson ... because I was so unsure and not confident and, as I looked round, everyone seemed to be getting on with it and I thought I don’t know what the hell they want me to do.

And you know as soon as you’re in that position, you can’t learn anything, you can’t take anything in. Things were being said, and I couldn’t understand. And I was sitting with a couple of people who seemed to know what it was all about and I thought ‘Oh crikey’. You know? And it was awful. It was horrible. I didn’t like that at all.’

Do you recognise these feelings about reading? It would not be surprising if you do, most of our students find reading a difficult, time consuming puzzle: they are not sure *why* they are reading, they don’t understand *what* they are reading and they don’t know *how* to read and use an academic text. All this prevents us from engaging successfully.

One of the best ways to understand the point of the reading is to start writing. Right at the beginning of your course, look for a difficult essay question on one of the more difficult modules. Yes – really – try something difficult first. Write out the whole question and give yourself just *ten minutes* to free write an answer. Free writing is where you write non-stop without correcting what you are writing – without trying to get it ‘right’ – you are just having a spontaneous ‘go’ (see [Chapter 11.2](#)).

Obviously what you write will not be ‘the answer’ – you do not know enough yet – but now you know what to look for when you read – you are reading to find the missing bits in your writing and in your thinking.

Free writing assignments right at the beginning of your course will help the whole course make more sense. You will know what you are listening for in lectures – you will know what you are looking for when reading. The sooner you start your assignments, the sooner you are reading with a purpose.

‘Free writing every week meant that I understood why I was reading for the first time!’

A beginner’s guide to reading (QOOQRRR)

‘I was thinking about all those books on that booklist. I was thinking I had to read every single one of those books and I didn’t know how I was going to

this the right person to read? Is this text recent enough? Check out the contents page – are you going to read one chapter or more? Why? Check out the index at the back (this is the list of useful words in the book – and where they are mentioned – the page numbers) – are the key words from your question in there? On what pages are they mentioned? Read those first.

If reading a whole chapter: read the introduction and the conclusion – these sum up a chapter or an article, they tell you what it's about. Read the first sentence of every paragraph – these outline what each paragraph is about. Once you have gained the overview of your course and the overview of the text – pause and *question* again: so, why am I reading this, now? You are now ready to read actively – with clear goals in mind.

Read through the text actively and interactively marking it up as you go. That is, underline key words, circle things, make notes in the margins. Reading is *not* passively absorbing the ideas of other people – it is asking questions, interrogating, arguing with what you are reading. It is a conversation – and like all conversations, it works better if you join in as well. So as you read you are asking: what is the point here? Who would agree or disagree with this? Where might I use this in my assignment? Who else would I refer to, to back up this line of argument? And as you do that, you make notes and scribbles to record this conversation. At this point, do not make your 'take away' notes – they will be too detailed – just make notes on the text (your text – not a library book!).

Once you have been through once, *re-read* your own scribbles, notes, annotations and marginalia – have a good think about them, and make your key word notes – remembering *why* you are reading. If you are reading because you have started a whole big new topic that you do not understand, you might want to summarise the whole thing – and lots of notes might be useful. Fine. But if you are only looking for ideas for one paragraph of one essay, you may only need to pick out a couple of ideas to use – and really, really short notes will be enough.

Once you have finished making your notes, *review* them and check whether they are useable ... Then write something – read something else.

Figure 4.1 Keep index card records

Author(s):

Date:

Title:

Place published:

Publisher:

Key quotes (and page numbers):

Remember referencing! Always record the author, date, title, place of publication and publisher when you read. Put the page numbers for quotes. Make *index cards* of everything you read – you may use the text again in another essay.

Tip

This strategy may feel slow and time-consuming – but it saves time in the end because it is so focused and productive.

Practical strategies to use right now

‘One of the most powerful things I ever learned to do was to photocopy chapters – and write all over them as I was reading. I really felt in charge – I took control of my reading. Everything changed when I did that.’

Academic reading is hard work and requires concentration, time and effort. So when you are going to read, get prepared mentally and physically. Here are some effective reading tips and strategies. As always, as you read through this section ask yourself how knowing that will help you as a student – make notes to remind yourself:

- Have everything you need to hand: dictionary, key texts (printed off or photocopied); pens, pencils, highlighters; notebook for new names, words and concepts; index cards and notepaper for your references and key word notes.
- Have the lighting and sound tuned to your study preference.
- Have water and fruit available to keep you energised.
- Make sure you will be undisturbed. Unplug your landline, switch off your mobile. Do not look for a disturbance to get you out of reading!
- Work at your ‘best’ time of day. In-depth reading is hard work and should be done when you are at your most alert. Work for an hour – and take a break.
- Set clear goals for each reading session: brainstorm – what do I know? What do I need? Which part of the question will this help me with? Use the QOOQRRR active and critical reading system.
- Read analytically and critically, engage with the text. Ask yourself questions about what you are reading. Do you understand it? Could you sum up the key points in a few words? Can you analyse it? Can you see what argument is made? What evidence is being offered? Who would agree or disagree? How can you use the information in your assignment? Annotate (obviously *not* the library books!).
- Read beyond the reading list – remember if you just give back to the tutor what they gave to you, you will get an average grade.
- Read people who ‘agree with’ you – but also read the opposition as well. Academic writing requires balance – and argument. Your academic reading requires that also.
- Keep a record of what you are reading. As soon as you sit down with a text,

record the author, date, *title*, location of publication (where it was published) and publisher (A (D) T. L:P). Make this an instinctive act that you do not even need to think about. If you use material from your reading without giving the reference you will be accused of plagiarism – even if this is an accident.

Tip

Use a variety of reading resources: books (printed and electronic: e-books), journal articles (printed and electronic: e-journals), academic websites, reports and conference papers, abstracts.

Tip

Record everything you read onto *index cards* and file them. Put the source (A (D) T L: P) at the top; summarise what the text was about; capture a couple of good quotes – with page numbers. Doing this means that you can use source material in more than one module and on more than one assignment. Use a referencing resource: www.nottingham.ac.uk/nmp/sonet/rlos/studyskills/harvard/resources.html.

A quick note on plagiarism

Plagiarism means kidnapping – and if you do not give your sources when you write you are in effect kidnapping someone else's work and passing it off as your own. Plagiarism is a major academic offence for which you can fail a module, be suspended from university – or even have your whole degree annulled.

'Well, I read it, I agreed with it and now I've put it in my own words – it's mine now. I don't have to give sources then, do I?'

Yes you do – the ideas still came from someone else. And anyway, you are supposed to be giving sources – you are not supposed to be making it all up – you are supposed to be using and acknowledging the knowledge-claims of your subject.

If you are worried about plagiarism, read our section on How to reference and prevent plagiarism ([Chapter 11.4](#)) – and use our online Preventing Plagiarism resource. In this there are student views on plagiarism, a tutorial and exit tests so that you can check out that you have understood it. Web search: LearnHigher Preventing Plagiarism Course or find it here: <http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/TLTC/learnhigher/Plagiarism/>.

Make reading fun

When reading, do have an assignment question in mind – and try to have some fun as well – we learn more when we can play with ideas. Try some of these:

- After reading, make a *collage* of the key ideas in the chapter or article. If asked

by your tutor to present your reading to the class, use your collage as a poster to help you remember and discuss the key ideas.

- Instead of writing about your reading – make a *visual summary*. Draw a diagram or picture of the text using as few words as possible. As you struggle to capture the ideas in pictures you will find that you are really struggling to understand and learn what you are reading.
- Build a *reading dossier* or a *reading notebook* not for one assignment but *over the whole of your degree programme*. Make or buy a series of sketchbooks and each week write about what you have read, why you read it, what it made you think about, what you now know about your subject, how you now feel about your progress/knowledge/assignments ...
- Vary your reading entries by sometimes drawing what you think – or adding pictures from newspapers or magazines. Make this space as creative as possible. Make it a place or thing that you want to use. When you have to write assignments, your reading dossier should provide plenty of source material – and it should be easy to use because you have invested feelings in it as well as thoughts.
- Don't forget to construct your own *subject dictionaries*. As you study new material you discover new words, concepts and phrases, so note these. Make your subject dictionary a key study and revision aid for yourself. Take control of your learning.
- Use Wikipedia – but don't only use Wikipedia!!

'Have you considered why we students read Wikipedia? It's not just because it is a source of information, but also because it can narrow down the topic and focus the research. Obviously this means that if the subject has not been covered in depth or is missing elements, it can throw a student in completely the wrong direction. It can also send the reader to some very suspect sources. This is what you ought to be telling us!'

Tip

Blog these.

Online resources to support academic reading

'There is a correlation with stock usage and e-resource usage. Those who achieved a first borrowed on average twice as many items as those who got a third. (University of Huddersfield: www.daveyp.com/blog/archives/1370)'

Explore these online resources and see how they help you to understand the reading process and develop your reading strategies. Why not blog, Facebook or Twitter your positive thoughts about them to other students?

- *Evernote* allows for a portable, messy, private online notemaking space: www.evernote.com/
- Or try *Cornell* notes: <http://coe.jmu.edu/learningtoolbox/cornellnotes.html>
- Or *visual notes*: www.visual-literacy.org/periodic_table/periodic_table.html#
- Have you thought about making notes on a *Prezi* website? <http://prezi.com>

Making *outlines* can help us understand and remember our reading. Try the following:

- Webspiration Classroom – from the creators of Inspiration, a wonderful graphic organiser that now allows for online collaboration and one of the best visual outline creators on the web: www.mywebspiration.com/
- Quicklyst – a free user-friendly site for creating outlines. Quicklyst also integrates with a search engine and dictionary for enhanced note taking. Study queues can be made as well: www.quicklyst.com/
- Knowcase – create collaborative outlines with this easy to use site that features a drag-n-drop interface: <http://knowcase.com/>
- Thinklinkr – a real-time collaborative outline creator that has a nice built-in chat feature to engage in project development: <http://thinklinkr.com/>
- Checkvist – a great collaborative online outliner that has an abundance of features such as gmail/browser integration, mobility, and nice import/export features: <http://checkvist.com/>

And, with thanks to Alice Gray, if you want to develop *speed-reading skills* try the following resources:

- Short Burst Learning – to find your current reading speed: <http://speed-reading-cd.shortburstlearning.com/reading-test.htm>
- Doyle, D. (2010) Glendale Community College: Self Pacing Methods – for five useful methods: <http://english.glendale.cc.ca.us/methods.html>

Summary

In the UK we are not taught our subjects, we read for our degree – and thus special reading strategies are useful and necessary. We have looked at the what, why and how of academic reading – offering guides to online support – and our own QOOQRRR reading strategy. We hope that you now feel a little better about reading – and that you will put these strategies into practice right now.

Activity

Find the library

Even in a digital age, reading starts with the library. Find your university library. Find where the books for your subject are kept. Make a habit of spending some time there every week. Notice the books that are available on your subject and dip into them. Have a look at the books that are available on other subjects as well. If you are studying sociology, you might find useful material in the psychology section of your library; if studying literature, you might try some quantum

mechanics, get creative – mix it up a bit.

- *The Counter Loans section*: there are never enough books to satisfy all our students. Therefore, universities have a special mini-library within the library proper. This is where all the essential reading is usually kept – and you can actually get your hands on it because these books are only allowed out for an hour or two. Use this area. Tip: If there are books that you need that are always out on loan, request that at least one copy be placed here.
- *Books and e-books*: become aware of the most up-to-date and useful texts on your subject. Get used to picking these off the shelves and having a quick look in the index – what is in the book? Can you make a few quick notes now – or will you have to read it later? When? Put a date in your diary. What e-books are available for your course? When are you going to access these to make notes for your assignment?
- *Journals and e-journals*: the most up-to-date books are always several months old by the time they are actually written and published – to keep up to date with your subject read the latest journals.

Tip

Find your subject librarian and ask them to recommend the best journals and e-journals for you. Make a habit of reading them. When reading don't just look at the information and ideas, look also at how arguments are constructed, how articles are written – this will be a model for your writing.

Now – complete our library checklist:

Books

Find the part of the library that houses the books for your subject.

- My books are
- The Dewey decimal number is

Journals

- My physical journals are kept
- Two journals I could be reading:
 - Journal One
 - Journal Two
- E-journals I can access include:

Newspapers

The newspapers are kept

Counter Loans Area (CLA)

My CLA with key texts is

I can borrow texts for hours and for over the weekend.

Study Areas

What facilities does your library offer?

- My library offers quiet Study Areas
- My library offers group Study Areas
- My library has a canteen

Workshops

Some libraries contain student help workshops – does yours?

- My library does/does not have workshops.
- They are located
- Opening times are

Review

Three things I like about the library:

1.
2.
3.

Access the companion website to this book and find helpful resources for this chapter topic: <https://study.sagepub.com/burnsandsinfield4e>