

Academic and critical reading



This leaflet will provide you with useful tips and techniques to help you with critical reading at University.

An important study skill

- Academic, or critical, reading is very different from everyday reading. Whilst studying at University you will read a large number of texts and publications, requiring your concentration and good understanding.
- Academic reading introduces you to new ideas and enables you to think about them in a different way.
- You will need to grasp main ideas, theories, key themes and arguments.
- Once you have understood these ideas, you can express yourself in essays and exams.
- It is important to learn and practise the skills you need to read academic texts, as this will increase your comprehension and save you time.
- Using various reading techniques will help you research and understand your subject both broadly and specifically.

Myths about academic reading

Myth	Reality
You have to read everything	You should be selective
You have to read every word in a text	You should read the important bits first
You should read everything at the same speed in the same way	Choose a reading strategy that matches the type of text and matches the purpose for reading
Reading a text once is enough	Read important bits first, then re-read again more slowly

- Academic reading is all about being selective, there is no need to read every text on a subject.
- Reading a text just once is not enough, you will need to read the important bits first, then re-read these sections more slowly.
- Don't read everything at the same speed. Choose a reading strategy to match the type of text and also to match the purpose of your reading.

Reading with a purpose

- You will read for different reasons, depending on the purpose. You will need to ask yourself why you are reading certain material and what your purpose may be. What information do you require?
- The way you read a newspaper or a magazine, for example, is very different to the approach you would take when reading an academic textbook.
- Academic reading is more than just recognising words on a page. It requires concentration on a deeper level, and you will need to understand the meaning of what the author is trying to say and think about the main theories and concepts.

Approaches to reading: Skimming

- Use this method to gain a quick overview of material and to see if the text is useful to you. Skimming **is not reading**. It will tell you about a text but you will not learn from it.
- Skim first sentences of paragraphs and pick out keywords to see if it is useful.
- Focus on facts and concepts – does it answer your questions? Focus on your essay question.
- Focus your attention on subheadings, **bold**, *italicized* or underlined text, figures and diagrams, graphs, charts or photographs if there are any.
- Use skimming to decide which books and journal articles will be useful to you, look at the following information:

Books

- **Blurb** – read this to find out a little more about the content and coverage of the book, who should read it, it may also give you information about different editions of books, for example what extra is offered in a newer edition of a text.
- **Title and author** – titles and subtitles may provide you with more descriptive information. Your tutor may recommend certain authors, and in time, you will be able to recognise other work by them.
- **Publication date** – located on the back of the title page. Check for most current edition. Some reading lists may point to older texts because they have produced an important contribution to the subject.
- **Table of Contents** – this can be in the form of main chapter headings or perhaps listing the main headings within the chapters. By looking at the contents pages, you can see if the book covers the topics that you are studying and how much coverage has been given to the subject. A good indication of this is the amount of pages the author has devoted to that particular subject.
- **Introduction** – detailed overview, possibly chapter-by-chapter summaries.
- **Chapter headings/summaries** – clues to what chapters will cover. Summaries may be provided prior to chapter. Use these to judge whether chapters will be relevant.
- **Glossary** – alphabetical list of subject specific terms. Use this to build vocabulary, this will help you when you are writing your essays.
- **Bibliography** – alphabetical list of all sources that the author has used to write the book. Use this to provide additional reading sources.
- **Index** – a list of topics that are covered in the book. Use this to search quickly for your topic. If it does not appear, the book may not be of use to you.

Journal articles

- **Title/author of article** – is the author a reliable source?
- **Publication date** – how current is the article?
- **Abstract** – a summary of what the article is about.
- **Headings** – clues to what the paragraphs will cover.
- **Tables and diagrams** – is the evidence supported?
- **Conclusions** – what are the findings?
- **Reference list** – alphabetical list of sources used to write the article.

Approaches to reading: Scanning

- Scanning is **different from skimming**. It is reading more carefully and a little bit slower.
- Scan for specific information – for example, a **quotation** or **supporting facts in an argument**.
- Restrict scanning to about 20% of the text. Identify topic sentences and evidence in each section. Although you will only work with part of the text, careful thinking, together with a sense of context gained from skimming, will mean that you can see the text more clearly and gain a stronger sense of the overall meaning.
- In books, read chapter introductions and conclusions in more detail, and scan the rest of the chapter. Scanning is where you read only to pick up the essential details and no more is read than absolutely necessary.
- You can, like skimming, look for titles/headings and formatting clues to help you locate what you are looking for.

Approaches to reading: Being critical

- Being critical when you are reading is a more specialised and sophisticated way to absorb and analyse information for a specific purpose. You are reading for content, looking for the best explanation or answer.
- Critical reading is a slower process and you must define your purpose before you begin. You will absorb more of the detail to make sure you understand what you are reading and how it relates to your topic.
- Critical reading challenges the reader and demands a greater amount of concentration. Read with a questioning mind. Identify arguments made by the author and analyse other concepts and theories.
- When you are reading pause every so often and think about what you have read. Do not just accept what the author has written – as you are reading have the following types of question in mind:
 - What evidence is used and how credible is it?
 - Can you see any bias in the author's work – what is their opinion?
 - How has the conclusion been reached?
 - Are there any other points of view out there?
 - Are you satisfied with the evidence in the conclusion?

For more information, tips and advice have a look at some of the links listed at the end of this guide, for example: *What is critical reading, Critical reading towards critical writing*.

The Learnhigher website also has some useful sections on effective reading, critical thinking and reflection.

Approaches to reading: SQ3R method

Try using the **SQ3R method** where you take an active approach to your reading. You will be going beyond only skimming or scanning and will actively gain real knowledge and understanding.

- **S = Survey**
This technique is **very similar to scanning** and helps to survey whether material will be useful. You can survey chapter summaries, introductions and contents pages. Some **chapters** will have **learning objectives** at the beginning and also **end of chapter questions**. Use these as this will help you **remember what you have read** – reading actively.

You will survey the book for content by flicking through the paragraphs and major headings, getting a general feel of the text. For an article, read the abstract, references, summary and first paragraph.
- **Q = Question**
Question what you already know, start reading with a questioning frame of mind.

What are the main ideas? What does the author believe and why? Is there any evidence to support a particular point you want to make in your essay? In the questioning process, you will actually be **thinking in a special way** – reflecting.

While the critical reading process is objective, **reflection is related to what you yourself do and think**, leading you to the objectivity you need to analyse what you have read.

At this point, you can begin to **expand your questioning**, to decide whether the material is just interesting, or truly useful. You may be able to see quickly that the material will be pertinent, especially if the conclusions match what you want to say in your own writing or project. You may notice similarities to material you have already found, or ideas you have already thought of.

- **R = Read**
Read actively, a section at a time and try to pick out key points, read again or return to any sections that are difficult to understand.
- **R = Recall**
Now close the book or article you were reading and **in your own words** briefly describe the main points the author was making. This counters plagiarism. Jot down notes, this improves your understanding of a subject.
- **R = Review**
Go back to the text and check your notes. Make sure you haven't missed anything and **jot down how your notes relate to the assignment or essay question**. Record bibliographic details for your references.

When to stop

It is also important to know when you have read enough, if the answer is 'yes' to the following questions then you should be ready to stop.

- Are you convinced by all the evidence?
- Have you got a balanced view?
- Have your questions been answered?

Useful links

- Knott, D., New College Writing Centre, University of Toronto (2012) *Critical reading towards critical writing*. Available at: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/reading-and-researching/critical-reading> (Accessed: 20 August 2012).
- Northumbria University (2012) *Northumbria Skills Plus*. Available at: <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus> (Accessed 11 May 2012).
- University of Leicester (2012) *What is critical reading*. Available at: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/careers/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/critical-reading> (Accessed: 20 August 2012).
- Learnhigher. (2013) Available at: <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/> (Accessed: 30 January 2013).



**Ask4Help - information and advice 24/7 on or off campus.
E-mail, telephone or visit an Ask4Help point.**

ask4help@northumbria.ac.uk
0191 227 4646
www.northumbria.ac.uk/ask4help