**Reading at University**

Reading is very important at university. You will need to read different texts (books, journal articles), for different purposes and using different methods. You will need to read to in order to broaden your knowledge on a subject. You will also need to read to understand a specific idea or theory or to understand an author’s argument. Different authors may have different views on the same subject, and you will need to read to familiarise yourself with the different points of view and the reasons the authors put forward in their support. You may need to analyse a piece of text critically, that is to say, break it down and consider each element and how it fits together. You will also need to read to gather support for your own arguments and views on a subject and show how it connects to other authors and your own ideas and knowledge. As you can see, reading is a useful skill to develop while at university.

**Three ways of reading**

There are several ways to read, but the three main ways are scanning, gist reading and close reading. Scanning is useful when you need to find a specific piece of information quickly, to extract a definition or a statistic, for example. To scan a text, you move your eyes over the text just to pick out the relevant pieces of information. You can also use this method to find key words in an index. The second method is to read to get the gist, a general understanding of the text. This is sometimes called skim reading as you are skimming across the text in order to get a broad overview. You would use this method to orientate yourself with the text. You may look at parts of the text such as the introduction and conclusion of a book or journal article to judge if it was relevant, or you may glance at the heading and sub-headings to form an idea of what the text covers.

Close reading, the third way of reading, is the most important. Close reading means reading something in detail and slowly in order to get a deep understanding of what the text is about. You would use this method when the text is essential to expanding your knowledge of the subject and understanding its deeper complexities. Close reading takes time and stamina, but will become easier with practice. Once you have used close reading to help you understandwhat the author is saying, it will help you to question and reflect on the text so that you can confidently applywhat you have read to both the other texts that you have read and to your own ideas. This, in turn, will help you to become a critical reader.

By practising all three types of reading methods, you will be able to select the most appropriate method for the task in hand. By reading more efficiently, you will create more time for close reading when this is needed.

**Applying your reading**

Once you have selected the most relevant texts to answer the essay question, you can begin to read. Keep in mind the questions “Why am I reading this?”, “What do I need from it?” and “Is it giving me what I want?” If you do not have a clear idea, however, of why you are reading a text, you will not be able to read effectively. If you do not understand your essay question, or if you do not keep your research question firmly in mind, then you will not know why you are reading a particular text and consequently you will not know what to focus on when taking notes. As a result, you will make notes on every chapter or the whole article without extracting the relevant information, quotation or argument.

Keeping a clear idea of the reason you are reading a particular text is important, but it is also important to show critical thinking as you read. To do this, you will need to ask questions as you read, for example ‘How does what the author is saying fit in with the views of other authors I have read?’ , ‘What do I think of the reasons the author puts forward to support the argument?’ You might think the reasons are very strong and you are persuaded by them to agree with the author’s point of view. On the other hand, you might see a flaw in the reasoning, or believe the points are less well argued than perhaps another author that you have read.

Your evaluation of the arguments and points put forward by the authors should help you form your own opinions on the subject. You will decide what to believe and, importantly, why you believe it. In most academic writing, you need to include your thoughts and reasoning and you can do this by using phrases such as ‘However, Author A has failed to address…,’ which shows that you have noticed an omission, or ‘Author A and B list the reasons this cannot be done, but Author C has taken a new direction with their theory of…’ which shows your awareness of the limitations of the first two authors and that you are up-to-date with the new theory which author C is proposing. A full list of vocabulary which will help you express your ideas through commenting on your reading in this way, is available from the University of Manchester’s Academic Phrase Bank webpage. http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/

You need to read a variety of authors to get different points of view on a subject, to understand the subject thoroughly and to decide what you think. You need to present both sides of an argument, even if you disagree with one, to produce a balanced answer to your essay. In a good essay answer, you should provide one point of view, then introduce a different view which you can dismiss with a strong reason. This is called a rebuttal. Then you can return to the point of view that you support with sufficient evidence to persuade your reader of the case you are putting forward.

**Making a difficult text easier to read**

**Keep reading**

Remember reading is like exercise. It will take time to build up reading stamina but it will come with practice. Make time for reading every day. Read good fiction too to build up your vocabulary and improve your sentence structure. Use a dictionary to check the meanings of words. Students often use a word which is not quite the right one, or they have confused it with a very similar word, for example assume and presume, affect and effect, or disinterested and uninterested.

**Break down the sentence and check the meaning of words**

If you are reading a text which is difficult to understand, break the sentences down into clauses. These are sections of text, usually divided by commas like this, which form the sentence. By breaking the sentence into smaller sections and checking words in a dictionary, you will be able to decipher the meaning more easily. It is best to look up unfamiliar words straight away, but for those words which you can guess at their meaning or get the gist of, make a list to look up later so you avoid interrupting your reading too much.

**Environment**

Be comfortable when reading, but not too comfortable so that you fall asleep! Read at a time of day when you are at your best and alert, rather than when you are tired. Read in good light and keep taking short breaks from looking at the text, by thinking over what you have read and making a summary note of the main points of the last paragraph, few pages or previous chapter.

**Signposting phrases and structures**

Use the signposting phrases and paragraph structure to help you understand the points that the author makes. For example, signposting words such as ‘thus’, ‘so’, ‘therefore’ indicate a conclusion or summary is coming. Words such as ‘on the other hand’, ‘on the contrary’, or ‘however’ indicate that an opposite point of view is being introduced. Paragraphs usually make one point and provide evidence and data to support it. These individual points build to make a case for the main argument that the author is putting forward. Recognising the author’s argument is key to understanding the text.

**Try another text**

For undergraduates, if you find the text still too difficult to read at first, keep trying, but if you make no headway, try another text instead. Even academics need to do this sometimes! You can also ask your tutor or other students on your course for help in understanding the text.

**Levels of reading texts**

If you are new to a subject, and having difficulty in reading the texts you have been given on your reading list, you might find looking in an encyclopaedia, or a dictionary specifically on your subject, a good place to begin. For example a dictionary of political thought will give you an overview and key points on liberalism. A short explanatory piece like this will provide you with ‘hooks’ on which to pin further reading. Textbooks are useful to introduce you to a subject too, and usually provide the basic ideas and theories in a particular subject in more detail than encyclopaedias and dictionaries. However, secondary texts are the key reading material at university and it is amongst these that you will find the authors who have written in your subject area. These texts are called secondary as they are usually written commenting on other key works and the ideas contained in them. In contrast, primary texts are those written at the time of the historical event, or the first experiment, the poem or the director’s film without comment and closer in time to the event that gave rise to them.

Here is an example of how to use all levels - encyclopaedias and dictionaries, textbooks, secondary and primary sources - in your essays. Imagine you have been given an essay to write on Romanticism, and have been asked to use a poet’s work to illustrate the key concepts. This is a new subject for you so where to begin? First you can use an encyclopaedia or dictionary to find a definition and key characteristics of the Romantic Movement. A textbook will give you a broader framework of Romanticism and introduce some of the poets who were part of it. So now you can look for a specific poet, let’s say Wordsworth, about whom many secondary sources have been written. The secondary sources will give you ideas on how Wordsworth as a romantic poet has been written about and what are the main points of interest. So now you can form your own ideas from weighing up the different arguments the authors have made. You will then be able to draw evidence from a selection of Wordsworth’s poems, the primary sources, to support your line of argument on Romanticism.