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STUDY SMART

ASSIGNMENT HELP
RESEARCHING AND
READING



PDF resources included in this section

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Researching and reading

What kind of resources should you use in your research? How do you know which ones are good to use? Build your research and critical thinking skills.

Researching and reading

Once you've understood the assignment question, you'll need to spend time researching the topic to help shape your response, and reading the resources you find. This is one of the most important parts of the assignment process, and you'll need to give it the biggest chunk of time (see [Assignment Calculator](#) for a personalised, step-by-step timeline).

STUDY SMART WEBSITE

Find this section on the Study Smart website here:

https://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart/home/assignment_help/researching_and_reading

RESEARCHING

FOR MOST OF YOUR ASSIGNMENTS, YOU WILL NEED TO DO SOME RESEARCH.

This means searching for scholarly information related to the topic in order to find out what researchers have said about it and develop your ideas about it. Once you have read and understood a range of sources one the topic, you will be better able to come to reliable conclusions about a particular question or issue.

Here you'll find help with the different types of sources you might use in research, how to find sources, and how to think about them. You can also ask a Library staff member in red for help in finding scholarly sources for your assignments.

MORE INFORMATION

→ Library Successful Searching tutorial:
Finding Sources



Types of sources

Different sources for different purposes

You may encounter many different types of sources as you begin to research your assignment. Each kind of source has its place in expanding your knowledge and understanding of a topic.

Not all sources are equal, though. You'll need to look carefully at each one and critically evaluate it so you can work out where it fits within the range of 'voices' on your topic. For more information about how to critically evaluate sources, see [Critical Thinking](#) (PDF, 145 kB). You should also watch the Library video [Evaluating sources using APPEAL](#) (video, 6:26).

The sections below describe different kinds of sources and what you could use them for.

Scholarly sources and non-scholarly sources

You may read in your Learning Guide or hear your tutor tell you that you should only use scholarly sources as evidence in your assignments.

Scholarly sources are sources that have been produced as a result of a rigorous research process and then reviewed by other scholars before they are published. Generally, they are written by qualified people in the academic community for other people in the academic community (like students, researchers, lecturers, etc.).

Non-scholarly sources are sources written or produced for an audience outside the academic community, i.e. the general public.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
Scholarly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ University assignments→ Academic research→ Other kinds of research (government reports, etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Peer-reviewed journal articles→ Scholarly books (written by academics for academics or for students)→ Academic conference papers→ Published research data sets→ Academic book reviews
Non-scholarly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ General knowledge→ Everyday purposes, e.g. news, entertainment, social media sharing, topics of conversation→ As data to analyse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ News→ General websites (including Wikipedia)→ Blogs (including those written by academics)→ Social media posts→ Fiction books→ Popular non-fiction books (including those written by academics for a general audience)→ Government documents and publications

General sources and specific sources

It's important to recognise that some types of sources rely on more general knowledge, and some rely on more specific, specialised knowledge. You'll probably start your research with general sources, but make sure you move on to specific sources. Your marker will be looking to see that you have read and understood the more specialised information that specific sources give.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
General source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Getting started in your understanding of a topic→ Understanding the key terms used→ Getting familiar with the important concepts and researchers in the field who are interested in that topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Encyclopedias→ Dictionaries→ Introductory textbooks→ Wikipedia
Specific source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Deepening your understanding of a topic and the specific issues associated with it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Journal articles→ Scholarly monograph books (by one author)→ Edited books and book chapters (by multiple authors)→ PhD theses and dissertations

Primary sources and secondary sources

A **primary** source is one where the author witnessed firsthand the events or phenomena they are writing about. A **secondary** source is one where the author is reporting on something that someone else saw and has written about.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
Primary source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Analysing as data for scientific, historical or social research→ Getting as close as possible to the event or phenomenon you are interested in	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Research reports (esp. in natural sciences)→ Personal journals, memoirs, letters, etc→ Public speeches→ Newspaper or magazine articles (current news)→ Audio or video recordings→ Photographs or artworks→ Literary works (poetry, novels, plays)→ Artefacts→ Records (statistical, etc)
Secondary source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Understanding how other people have interpreted the event→ Understanding the different issues that are relevant in the study of the event or phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Journal articles→ Academic books (including history books, textbooks, etc)→ Encyclopaedias

Quantitative sources and qualitative sources

This distinction mainly applies to data that you might have to collect and/or analyse in a research project. **Quantitative** data is information about things that can be measured and expressed in numbers. **Qualitative** data is information about the qualities of things, which can't be measured and are usually expressed in words.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
Quantitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Statistical analysis→ Describing tendencies in terms of probabilities→ Disciplines such as science, economics, accounting, engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Statistics from the ABS→ Results from a science experiment
Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Content analysis→ Understanding behaviour (human or animal)→ Describing specific cases (e.g. case studies)→ Describing general characteristics→ Disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, literary studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Texts (literature, stories, poetry, articles, etc)→ Artefacts (objects)→ Descriptions of behaviour or characteristics

More information

Once you've found your sources, you will want to use them effectively. Visit our [Researching and reading](#) section to explore strategies for reading effectively and organising your reading.



Activity

Using the following table, consider each type of source in terms of the four ways of classifying sources. Some have been done for you. Which ones are hard to decide? Why?

	Scholarly	Non-scholarly	Generic	Specific	Primary	Secondary	Quantitative	Qualitative
Journal articles (peer-reviewed)	X			X		X	X	
Academic conference papers								
News (online, print or AV)		X	X		X			
Blogs								
Fiction books and literary texts								
Popular non-fiction books								
Government documents and publications								
Wikipedia								
Encyclopaedias								
Introductory textbooks								
Theses/dissertations								
Historical accounts								
Personal journals, memoirs, letters								
ABS statistics								
Photographs/artworks								



Critical thinking

Critical thinking is often talked about at university. That's because it's a very important skill for you to develop as you go through your degree.

Critical thinking is a life skill

You probably already have experience in critical thinking from other areas of life, such as deciding on which phone or computer or car to purchase, where to live, or even what to wear on a particular occasion. In each situation, you probably don't just do what someone else tells you to do, but you make a decision based on a range of factors. For example, if you're looking for a room or property to rent, you might have to evaluate things such as:

- What are the positive points of the property, and what negative points does it have (e.g. first floor apartment means no steps, but possibly less privacy and less security; bedroom is next to driveway so it could get traffic noise; I get my own bathroom, but I'll have to keep it clean myself)?
- Can I afford to live in the property, not just now but for the whole lease period?
- Does the property meet my living needs (enough space for family, pets allowed, smoking allowed, quiet enough, laundry facilities, heating/cooling, etc.)?
- Is the location suitable for my lifestyle (access to transport, distance to work or university, friends, shops, nightlife, etc.)?
- How does this property compare to other properties in the same area or different areas?
- Am I likely to be accepted as a tenant?
- Would I be able to live well with the neighbours/housemates?



The answers to these questions form part of the evidence you consider in order to make your final decision about where you will live.

Critical thinking at university

At university, critical thinking and writing involves many different ways of thinking. The diagram below shows some of these.



(Adapted from Hub for Academic Language and Learning (HALL), 2015).

It's good to remember that being **critical** in your thinking is not the same as being **negative**. For example, when you are reading a paper you might think the author has made a good point. The 'critical' part is being able to say *why* you think they've made a good point based on their evidence and argumentation.

If you do disagree with someone's ideas, you should always do so respectfully. You can show respect by taking their ideas seriously and doing your best to understand how they came to their conclusions. If you go through this process of genuinely engaging with other people's ideas, you have the right to disagree (even very strongly) with an author's view.

(Adapted from Miles & Spies-Butcher, 2012).

Why do I need to think critically?

In some cultures, students are expected to memorise information and regurgitate it in an exam. In the Australian university context, you are considered a member of the academic community. You are expected to be able to think independently and form your own conclusions based on information from various sources.

Thinking critically has the following benefits:

- you get to see that there is always more than one way of looking at something
- you'll be able identify the best ideas and evidence to use in your assignment, and not just settle for the first thing you read
- your assignment will stand out from the rest because your ideas will be better supported and more convincingly argued
- your own ideas and academic 'voice' will be clearer in your writing because you are better able to explain how and why ideas differ
- you'll develop your knowledge and understanding more generally as you make connections between different ideas and methods
- you'll become a better problem-solver and lifelong learner
- you'll be more attractive to employers

How do I develop my critical thinking skills?

Some general tips for critically evaluating ideas or methods are:

- asking questions
- considering what someone means by a particular idea
- comparing and contrasting with other ideas or methods
- examining the evidence that someone presents to support their idea or method
- examining the way someone argues their point
- identifying the strong and weak points of an idea or argument
- reading widely on a topic to immerse yourself in it and become familiar with the kinds of terms and frameworks used

Questioning as you listen

Your lecturer or tutor may mention some research that is relevant to the lecture topic.
Make a note to read it later and check it out.

Your lecturer or tutor may use a technical term or symbol that has a meaning different from what you might expect.
Ask them about it.

Questioning as you read

Before you read a source in detail, consider whether that source is appropriate for your academic work.
You can use the 'APPEAL' framework to help you.



Watch [Using APPEAL to evaluate sources](#) (video), Library podcast, 6:26, and [Using APPEAL to evaluate websites](#) (video), Library podcast, 8:09.

Once you have identified appropriate sources for your assignment, use the questions in the table below to help you develop your critical reading skills. As you read, look for information to answer the questions. To make it more manageable, read through the list and choose one question from each box to answer about your reading.

Feature	Questions to ask about that feature
Purpose	Why has the author written the material? Does the author state his or her purposes explicitly? Are there other 'hidden' purposes?
Audience	Who is the intended audience of this material (e.g. other academics, students, general public, government officials, businesses)?
Focus & scope	Which aspects of the topic has the author chosen to concentrate on? Which aspects have they left out? Do they give any reasons for leaving out an aspect of the topic? Is the material presented in breadth (wide coverage but not very deep) or depth (detailed coverage of a narrow aspect of the topic)? What is the main argument or theme in the material?
Evidence	What explanation or evidence is used to support the main points? Is there any evidence of deliberate bias, such as which sources are used or how the material is interpreted? Do the facts seem correct? How easily could you check them? Has the author included any material that seems irrelevant?
Argumentation	How does the author introduce the subject? How does the author develop the argument or theme from one main point to another? How does the conclusion relate to the introduction and to the rest of the material?
Assumptions & influences	What are the author's assumptions? Are these explicitly stated? Is the author's purpose influenced by a contemporary issue or a particular philosophy? Is the author defending a particular point of view?
Organisation	What framework is used to organise the material? Is the framework clearly explained? How is the content organised and developed within the framework? Does the author restate what has been said at appropriate points? Does any graphic material (tables, diagrams, etc.) illustrate or restate the written content?
Style	In what style has the material been written? For example, is it formal or informal, simple or complex, didactic (teaching) or persuasive, narrative (telling a story) or analytical (pulling something apart and examining it)? How does the style and format influence your reaction to the material?
Your knowledge and questions	Which of your questions about the subject does the author answer? How are the contents related to what you know about the topic? Do any items puzzle or intrigue you?

(Adapted from Murdoch University (2016), after Marshall and Rowland (1981, pp. 102–103)).

Questioning as you write

As you research and write, you will make decisions and come to conclusions about particular questions and ideas. It's important to examine your own processes and ideas as well as those of others. For example, you might ask 'Why did I come to that conclusion?' and 'Why did I decide to include that piece of evidence but not another one?'.

More information

- Do the 'Critical Thinking' tutorial from Clarity English to assess and develop your critical thinking skills. Go to [Clarity English](#) and select 'Study Skills Success' and then the 'Critical Thinking' section.

You can find Clarity English under 'C' in the Library's [eResources](#), and log in using your Western ID. For more information on using Clarity English see [Login instructions for Clarity English](#), [Lynda.com](#), and [YourTutor.com.au](#) (PDF, 54 kB)

- When you are starting to prepare for an assignment, try the following steps to immerse yourself in your assignment topic:

1. Plot your personal ideas on a topic before reading the assigned readings and any other readings. You could draw a mind map or use a free online mind mapping tool such as [MindMup](#) (use Chrome, Firefox or Safari browsers).
2. Read an introductory text or a chapter in your textbook on this topic. Has the reading changed or affirmed your views?
3. Read another chapter or text written by a different author on the same topic. How did the ideas presented by this author 'fit' with the first author? Have your ideas been further modified or not? Why or why not?

(Adapted from Hub for Academic Language and Learning (HALL), 2016).

- For more tips on critical and active reading, see [How to read effectively](#) (PDF, 519 kB).

References

Hub for Academic Language and Learning (HALL) (2016). *Developing your critical writing abilities*. Western Sydney University.

Marshall, L. & Rowland, F. (1981). *A Guide to learning independently*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Miles, B. & Spies-Butcher, B. (2012). *Short exercise practice 1: Critical analysis – reading*. Sydney: Department of Sociology, Macquarie University.

Study Successfully. (2016). *Critical thinking is the art of asking questions*. Murdoch University. Retrieved from

<http://our.murdoch.edu.au/Student-life/Study-successfully/Support-for-your-assignments/Critical-thinking/>

READING

YOU READ ALL THE TIME, WHETHER YOU REALISE IT OR NOT.

You read text messages on your phone, the timetable at the bus stop, or the signs on the road. You might read the weather forecast in the newspaper or in an app so that you know how to dress, the advertisements on the train because you're bored, or a novel for fun. Each type of reading and its purpose is different, again whether you realise it or not.

Many students struggle with reading for university, but it doesn't have to be an uphill battle. You just need to figure out what you need to read and why you need to read it, then use the strategies in these PDFs to help you become a more effective reader.

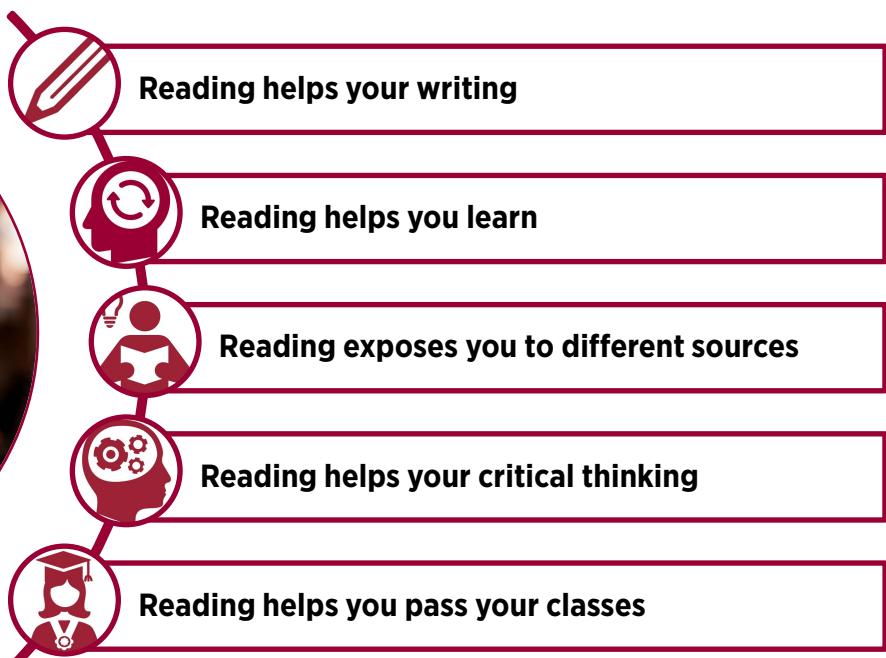


The why, when, and what of reading

Proven benefits of reading

Many students find reading for academic purposes difficult. Reading a textbook is very different to reading your social media feed or the cooking instructions on the back of a noodle packet.

Although academic reading can be hard work, it's necessary in order to succeed at university and in your career. Here's why:



Reading helps your writing



Effective reading leads to effective writing, because reading lets you see how other people write. Reading gives you examples of sentence structures, new vocabulary, and differences in tone between genres. Quality resources will demonstrate correct use of grammar and punctuation, and can even model accurate citation for you. This kind of learning from reading can be almost subconscious, or it may be a bit more explicit (for example when you stop to look up a new word in your dictionary).

Reading helps you learn



You need to become familiar with your discipline area, and the material cannot be communicated to you through tutorials and lectures alone. Reading helps you learn at a deeper level.

Reading exposes you to different sources



You need to learn from multiple and varied sources. You might think your main source of information at university is your lecturer or your tutor. But that's just one or two people, and they probably don't know everything, and they may have different ideas to other people. Plus, people change their mind, while a written text is static and timeless – you can return to a book over and over and the information or opinions won't change. Reading is therefore a reliable source of information within a certain timeframe.

Reading helps your critical thinking



Reading a range of sources exposes you to a range of ideas and opinions. If you take your lecturer as the only source of information you will only be getting one person's perspective. It might be a really interesting and useful perspective, and your lecturer probably knows almost all there is to know about the subject, but they are just one person. Effective critical thinking means you consider a range of ideas and information from a variety of sources. You will do this throughout your life, not just at university. Imagine you're buying a car – will you go with the first salesperson who approaches you, or will you visit a few different dealerships, talk to a range of sellers, read reviews and product information, and make a careful decision based on all the available evidence?

Reading helps you pass your classes



You can't pass your classes if you don't read. Simple as that. You need to read to keep up with class content, and you need to perform research for most types of assessments.

When to read

There are 3 main contexts for your reading at university: lectures, tutorials, and assignments. The same reading might be useful for all 3 contexts, or you may have to read different texts for each one.

You need to do the reading...

...before **lectures** so that you have a working knowledge of the background of the topic. Your lecturer will discuss specifics and build on concepts you learned in your reading.



LECTURES

...before **tutorials** so that you can raise any questions you have or concepts you need clarified. You also need to be able to participate in discussions and activities based on the reading or other pre-class activities.



TUTORIALS

...for **assignments** to help you find an answer, investigate a problem, or formulate an argument. This is called research.



ASSIGNMENTS

What to read

What you read depends on the context. Many units will set regular readings for before lectures and tutorials. Follow your weekly readings so that you can keep up with the classes, and refer to [How to read effectively](#) (PDF, 256 kB) to maximise your time.

Reading for assignments or research, however, can be different to reading for your classes. Some units will give you a reading list for an assignment, possibly divided into essential and optional items. Often you'll be expected to find more readings on your own, which is called research – see [the Library's Successful Searching module](#) for more information.

It can be difficult to keep track of what you have already read and what you need to read next, so come up with a system early on for managing your reading lists and notes. See our Study Smart guides on [General note-taking](#) (PDF, 134 kB) and [Note-taking techniques](#) (PDF, 526 kB), as well as [Organising your reading](#) (PDF, 68 kB). You should always make sure you have some pen and paper or a note-making app ready before you start reading so that you can immediately write down any important information you come across.

Now that you're ready to start reading, look at our guide on [How to read effectively](#) (PDF, 256 kB).

See also:

- Using digital textbooks
- Digital learning and development
- Western Sydney U Library YouTube channel

External links to help you:

- An Open Letter to High School Students about Reading
- Palgrave Study Skills: Reading and Research Strategies

References

- Taylor, A., & Turner, J. (2014). *Academic reading: Handbook for students*. Learnhigher. Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/research-skills/reading/academic-reading-handbook-for-students/>
- UniStep guide: Making the transition to university* (10th ed.). (2013). Sydney, Australia: Hub for Academic Literacy and Learning (HALL), Learning and Teaching Unit, University of Western Sydney.



How to read effectively

In [The why, when, and what of reading PDF](#) (382, kB), we mentioned that reading for academic purposes is different to other types of reading. You don't have to linger over the words like you might with a work of fiction, but you don't have to rush through either. You may also read differently depending on your purpose – if you are reading for general background information you may read more quickly and generally than you would read when looking for information about a specific topic for an essay.

Effective reading strategies will ensure you read efficiently. It's a 3-step process:



Pre-reading



The pre-reading stage is about getting familiar with the text, and setting out any goals. There are three methods you can use while pre-reading: survey, skim, and scan. Ask yourself “why am I reading this?” and let that guide whether you survey, skim, or scan the text, or do all three.



Survey

A survey gives you a general overview of the work. Take a sweeping look at the introduction, conclusion, and any contents or indices. Note the title, the author, and the publication details (record these right away in the necessary citation style, just so you have it). You might ask yourself:

- What is the text about?
- Who wrote it, and why?
- How recent is it?
- Is it useful for my purpose?

Skim

Skimming the work helps you get an idea of the outline of the argument. Do this by looking at chapter titles or section headings. This helps you figure out where the information you need most might be located.

After a survey and/or skim read, you might decide that the book or article isn't relevant to your purpose after all. That's fine. Cross it off your list and move on to the next item. You've saved a lot more time than you would have if you had read the whole thing before realising it wasn't useful.

Scan

Scanning the text helps you determine which of the sections are most relevant to your topic or purpose. Do this by looking for specific keywords or phrases in chapter titles, section headings, or paragraphs themselves. With electronic texts you can search for particular words by using ctrl + f (or command + f when using a Mac). What's relevant depends on why you are reading – if you are getting background information before a lecture then you may need to read the whole text, but if you are answering a pre-tutorial question you might need to find just one bit of information.

Remember, you don't have to read the whole book or the whole article if you're looking for something specific. Pre-reading will help you work out which parts you need to read. However, be alert – if you can't find what you're looking for, or you can't follow the logic of the text or the author's argument, you may need to pause and take the time to read more thoroughly.

Reading



Whoohoo, this is the bit everyone knows how to do, right? Read away!

Not so fast. Have you ever found yourself reading the same sentence over and over, unable to figure out what it means? Have you ever felt your eyes glaze over as you read yet another unfamiliar word? To combat these inefficiencies you need to be an effective reader.

Effective readers are selective, active, and critical.



Selective reading means you read only the parts that are particularly relevant to your purpose. That's right, you don't always have to read every single word, especially if your eyes are glazing over. If you've done your pre-reading, then you should be able to find the information you need pretty quickly. If not, take another scan of the text and look for keywords relating to your topic (remember you can use the search function to search electronic text quickly and easily). Not sure what you're looking for? Go back to *why* you are reading what you're reading. Is it for a lecture, tutorial, or assignment? Is there a question you need to answer, or a concept you need to understand? Let this be your guide.



Active reading means doing something with the text, either physically or intellectually. The physical options include highlighting, underlining, or writing notes in the margin, but ONLY – we can't stress this enough – ONLY if the book belongs to you or you've printed the article out. Do not ever write in or on someone else's book, especially a library book!

If it's not yours, don't worry, you can still be an active reader – you just need to make notes on another piece of paper or on your device, and/or think over issues in your mind.

Being active intellectually might include:

- asking questions in response to things you read
- practising paraphrasing ideas or passages from the text
- writing summaries of the key points
- looking up unfamiliar words or phrases
- practising critical thinking.

Remember, if you make any notes on an electronic textbook you should download or save those notes to your own computer or USB storage, as you won't always have access to the online version. For more information, see our page on [Using digital textbooks](#).



Critical reading means using your [critical thinking skills](#) (PDF, 145 kB) on the text you are reading. Some of the things you might think about include:

- the writer's purpose (are they trying to persuade you of something?)
- the writer's stance and any biases
- the language the writer is using to make their case
- the evidence being cited
- how what you're reading fits with or challenges your own views and ideas.

It's OK to **read the text through more than once**. Some people find it particularly useful to read the first time without highlighting or taking notes, just so they get a sense of the overall text and main ideas. This can help you identify the most relevant parts so that you read selectively the second time through. The second reading is when you really get into the swing of things by making notes, being active, and reading critically.



Post-reading

You've finished reading! Yay! Now what?

Well, you might want to read it again. Sometimes the first read-through helps you get a general sense of the topic, and then the second read-through is where you really get to grips with the main ideas and work your effective reading magic. What you do next depends, as always, on why you're reading, but here are some options for general reading:

- Test your memory and write down all the main ideas you remember from the text
- Read over your notes and double-check you understand all the key concepts
- Draw a mind map of the main ideas and how they relate to each other
- Note any gaps in your knowledge for further reading, or things to ask your lecturer or tutor about
- Answer any pre-class questions or complete assigned activities relating to the reading

When you're reading for research for an assignment, do the following:

- Check you have accurate details and write the citation in the correct style for your bibliography or reference list. Practise writing the in-text citation as well.
- Consider how the reading fits in with your other research. Does it offer a very different view, or does it support the other things you have read? Perhaps draw a mind map of the main ideas of what you have read.
- Think about the authority of the writer and their level of objectivity. Consider the originality of the work compared with others you have read. Think about the accuracy and currency of the source and how you might use it in your work. Use the APPEAL criteria to help you (Library: [Evaluate resources using APPEAL](#), video, 06:26).
- Look over the bibliography or reference list if there is one. What sources did the author use? Are any on your unit reading list (a sign that you really need to look at them)? Have you read any of these already? Which ones will you follow up on? Add these to your personal reading list (see our [Organising your reading PDF](#)).

Extra tips, or things to try when you get stuck

It's OK not to understand everything you read. We read so that we can learn new things, after all. Also, not every text you read will be written in a way you immediately respond to. Some texts will be aimed at students studying at a higher level, or will assume the reader is an expert on the topic, while you're a novice. Don't stress. When you get stuck, try some of the tips outlined below.

Difficulty following the argument

Eyes glazing over? No idea what the author is trying to say? You need to work out the **controlling idea**, which is the main reason why the writer is writing. The controlling idea is similar to your thesis statement when writing an essay (see our [Essay Structure PDF](#) (114 kB) for more information). There might be one controlling idea, or there might be more. Go back to your pre-reading strategies and look at the title, any headings, the abstract and/or the introduction to help you define the controlling idea. Try to write this out in your own words on a separate piece of paper.

The **main ideas** of the text support the controlling ideas. The main ideas will often, but not always, be stated in the topic sentence or first sentence of a paragraph. They may be contained in section headings. Highlight main ideas in a particular colour or write them in your own words as dot points on a sheet of paper.

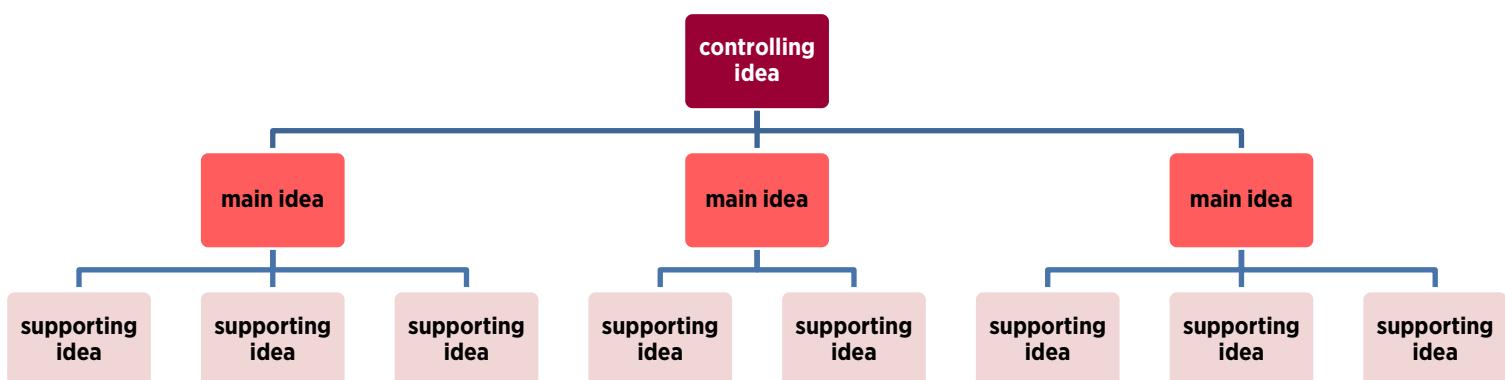
Once you have identified the controlling idea/s and the main ideas you can start to look at how these relate to each other, and the supporting ideas and information that the writer includes to strengthen these. Look for connecting words and phrases that link or contrast ideas (see the 'connecting words and phrases' section in our [sentence structure PDF](#) (131 kB)).

Difficulty with complex sentences

Some writers just like to write long sentences, it's true. But with patience, you can work out what they're trying to say. For background information on sentence structure, check out our [PDF on sentence structure](#) (131 kB).

Start by reading slowly and read the sentence more than once. Try reading it aloud as well. The punctuation can help you figure out the pauses, and breaks the sentence into smaller chunks.

Identify the main clause and then the supporting clauses. See if you can find all the verbs (the doing words), and then find the subject of each verb, and the object/s. See our [Grammar PDF](#) (79 kB) for more information.



Difficulty with new vocabulary

When you come across an unfamiliar word or phrase, the best thing to do first is to try to work out the meaning from context alone. Then have a look at the word itself and see if it looks like any other word you know. Does it have a prefix like 'pre-' or 'anti-' (meaning 'before' and 'against', respectively)? Does it have a suffix like -able or -ology (meaning 'capable' and 'the study of', respectively)? You might not know what 'ontology' means at first sight, but you can at least work out that it's a study of something, even if you don't know what that something is. The rest of the sentence or paragraph might help you figure out that ontology is the philosophical study of existence OR a system of naming with particular application in information science. Context will tell you which one applies.

It's great to look things up in the dictionary, and we encourage you to do so. See [here for a list of dictionaries and reference works](#) you might want to use. But try not to turn to the dictionary first and instead take the time to see if you can work out the meaning yourself, and then use the dictionary to confirm your understanding. This will help your brain remember the word and its meaning, and make a new connection. Also, if there are many words that are new to you in a

text, you might spend all your time checking the dictionary instead of reading. Many textbooks include a glossary at the back and that might be a more suitable place to look up new words, especially if they have a special meaning particular to that text. Start your own glossary as well, and write down every new word or phrase and its meaning in your own words. For scientific concepts you can use [Springer Exemplar](#) to see how other writers use the word or phrase.

The final step to learning new vocabulary is to put it into practice and try it for yourself. Write a sentence using the word and cement it in your memory, or create some flashcards and quiz yourself regularly.

See also:

- Using digital textbooks
- Digital learning and development
- Western Sydney U Library YouTube channel

External links

- An Open Letter to High School Students about Reading
- Palgrave Study Skills: Reading and Research Strategies

References

Henderson-Brooks, C., & Collison, L. (2016). *Reading smarter*. Sydney, Australia: Western Sydney University.

Taylor, A., & Turner, J. (2014). *Academic reading: Handbook for students*. Learnhigher. Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/research-skills/reading/academic-reading-handbook-for-students/>

UniStep guide: Making the transition to university (10th ed.). (2013). Sydney, Australia: Hub for Academic Literacy and Learning (HALL), Learning and Teaching Unit, University of Western Sydney.



Organising your reading

Keeping track of what you've read and the notes you've made can easily overwhelm you. When it comes to unit or assignment reading lists, cross off items as you read them. Organise the rest of your reading both physically and virtually. In physical terms, keep printed articles and paper notes in folders organised by unit, topic, or assignment. In virtual terms, keep your notes in a folder on your hard drive (and/or USB) and your list of readings in a Word document, or use reference management software. And always keep backups!

Reference management software

The Library licenses a couple of reference management systems:

- RefWorks – web-based, for all staff and students
- EndNote – downloadable software available to staff and postgraduate students

Other tools and software are available, including some free web-based options and a Reference Manager in Microsoft Word. Visit [the Library's Referencing and Citation page](#) to find out more.

If nothing else, keep a running list of your reading in a word processing document so you can easily refer back and find the correct citation.



Things to remember

- Keep a record of everything you read, together with your notes if possible.
- Record citations in the correct referencing style for your discipline (programs like RefWorks and EndNote can usually format these for you, provided you have put in the information correctly, so check for accuracy).
- Import citations from database records where possible, but always check for accuracy.
- Find a way of distinguishing what you've read from what you haven't read. Prioritise readings if necessary using criteria such as currency and relevance.
- Don't be overwhelmed by the amount of information out there. With careful [pre-reading strategies](#) (PDF, 256 kB) you will be able to prioritise your reading and focus on finding what's relevant for you and/or your assignment.
- Regularly save electronic notes and be aware that you will lose access to electronic textbooks at the end of the semester.

See also:

- General note-taking advice (PDF, 134 kB)
- Successful Searching tutorial
- Evaluate resources using APPEAL (video, 6:26)
- Using digital textbooks

References

Taylor, A., & Turner, J. (2014). *Academic reading: Handbook for students*. Learnhigher. Retrieved November 18, 2016, from

<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/research-skills/reading/academic-reading-handbook-for-students/>

UniStep guide: Making the transition to university (10th ed.). (2013). Sydney, Australia: Hub for Academic Literacy and Learning (HALL), Learning and Teaching Unit, University of Western Sydney.



Reading worksheet

Keep this worksheet by your side to remind you of the information you need to know. Fill it out every time you read a new article, or use it as a basis for your own notes.

What are you reading? Fill in the citation details here.

Type of text

Author(s)

Date of publication

Title of work or section

Journal article:

Journal title

Volume number

Issue number

Page numbers of article

DOI if electronic

Book or book chapter:

Editor(s) if different to author(s)

Title of book

Publisher

Place of publication

Edition number if not first edition

Page numbers of section

For other types of references, refer to the relevant [citation guide](#) to check what information you need. See also our [note-taking advice](#) (PDF, 134 kB).

Why are you reading this?

Jot down some brief notes – is this assigned reading for a lecture or a tutorial, is it for background information, or for an assignment? What do you hope to find out, or what are your reading goals?

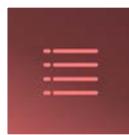
Pre-reading

Use one or more of the following strategies to find what you need to know:



survey

- general overview
- look at title, author, date
- contents, indexes
- introduction and conclusion



skim

- note the outline of the argument
- look at chapter titles and section headings



scan

- find the most relevant sections
- look for keywords or phrases
- use 'Find' on electronic texts

Reading

Read **selectively, actively, and critically**.

Use this space for some notes e.g. controlling ideas and main ideas:

Write here any new words or phrases you come across and their definitions:

Post-reading

Consolidate your understanding:

- Test your memory and write down what you remember from the text
- Draw a mind map of the main ideas
- Note any gaps in your knowledge or questions you have
- Complete any pre-class activities
- Consider how the reading fits in with what else you've read or learnt
- What are you going to read next?

References

Taylor, A., & Turner, J. (2014). *Academic reading: Handbook for students*. Learnhigher. Retrieved November 18, 2016, from <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/research-skills/reading/academic-reading-handbook-for-students/>

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