

Student Learning Support



UNIVERSITY *of* BALLARAT

Worksheet N° 5

Reading Effectively

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“Oh No! Not *more* reading...”

One of the more daunting aspects of tertiary study is the large volume of independent reading that is expected of students. Lecturers compile and issue students with comprehensive reading lists of books and articles that provide students with material to contrast and extend that presented in lectures.

Students must also learn to use references and extract information about specific topics in order to write essays, reports and other assigned work. A natural reaction to this is “*Oh no! Not more reading...*” so, with so much to read, how is it possible to cover all of this material?



Reading as a Skill

Reading is a skill and, like any other skill, it will improve with routine practice.

Start by asking yourself “Am I a regular reader?” Although it is difficult to put a precise value on “*regular*”, a regular reader would probably read about 50-100 pages of material *every day*. Obviously the amount that you can read is dependent upon the type of material you are reading; you can process more “light” material (the newspaper, a novel, a magazine) than “heavy” material (scientific journals, textbooks, technical literature).

If you haven’t done so already then you should also consider taking a *Library Tour* to show you the types of publications that are available (including electronic), where these are located and how they are accessed.

A Word About Speed

Speed Reading is often promoted as an essential skill that will enable tertiary students to cover large volumes of academic reading material. However, this is misleading because speed by itself is not sufficient to ensure comprehension. An *average* reading rate is between 230 and 250 words per minute, but this figure can be quite deceptive since the word rate for a Batman comic is likely to be much higher than that reading a scientific text.

Acknowledging this variability in reading rates is important because it indicates that we must remain aware of the *type* of material to be read and our *reasons* for reading. What is important is developing *efficient* reading strategies and speed becomes a mere by-product of a greater overall proficiency.

A Word About Language

In the course of your reading you will constantly be exposed to new words and jargon. Perhaps you have been tempted to skip any large or unknown words in the past. This may be counter-productive because a particular word might have been included intentionally by the author to aid your understanding. It is important for you to increase both your common and technical vocabulary because this will allow you to express yourself more clearly in written and oral communication.

You must use your best judgement when encountering new words. If a word is central to your understanding (eg. a technical term), then you should ascertain the meaning before proceeding. If a word doesn’t appear to be crucial then you can probably afford to skip it and keep reading since it is often better to try to decipher the meaning of a word from the context in which it is used. It is also useful to keep a written *glossary* of new words and terms as a reference so that you can build these into your everyday vocabulary.

1. Why am I reading this?

When you read, what are your reading *goals*? Reading is a purposeful activity and knowing why you are reading allows you to map out a *strategy* to cover the material more efficiently without suffering a loss of comprehension. Whilst you are a studying at university you will find that much of your reading is devoted to absorbing and remembering new concepts and facts. The next time you find yourself reading an article for a particular subject ask yourself the following questions:

- **Why is it important for me to read this material?**
- **What information am I expected to absorb?**
- **How am I expected to demonstrate comprehension of this material?**

It is in your interests to be clear about *why* you are reading. Are you reading for entertainment? To research an assigned paper? In preparation for an exam? The overall purpose provides clues for how you should strategically approach reading the material and the amount of effort required by your eyes and brain in order to extract what you need for your purpose.

2. Choosing your Reading Strategy

The amount of effort required to read a particular piece of literature is directly related to the complexity of the material. Consider the difference between the following types of reading material and the approach you might use when reading:

Material	Strategy
Newspaper	Glance at stories. Scan for information that is of interest.
Novel	Read every word to follow the plot and appreciate literary style.
VCR Installation Manual	Scan through material to get an overview of the steps involved. Read the installation steps whilst interacting with the machine.
Philosophical Essay	Read each word carefully, stopping regularly, and re-reading to comprehend arguments.
Technical Article	Read each word carefully, stopping regularly, and re-reading to comprehend information.
Telephone Book	Find and read selected listing. Transcribe information to paper if necessary.

There are five distinct ways of approaching any reading task based upon your reading goals, which are:

1. **Entertainment** - The information may be useful but is probably dispensable
2. **Overview** - You want to determine whether the material will be useful
3. **Main Ideas** - You seek the main points being put forward in the literature
4. **Specific Information** - You are only interested in specific points as opposed to all points
5. **Detailed Knowledge** - You must understand and remember the material to gain mastery

It is not really appropriate to discuss **Entertainment** reading here because this is not directly related to improving your independent learning skills. This worksheet looks at each of the remaining four strategies in detail but, first, we will investigate the *Anatomy* of books and Journals to divulge the wealth of information that can be extracted **without** having to read the entire work.

The Anatomy of a Book



Once you have determined *why* you are reading then it becomes possible to direct your energy towards getting the understanding you require. Books (and Journals) are compiled according to a definite structure which, if understood, can assist greatly in the extraction of information. So... how is a book organised?

Select an academic book and see if it provides the following pieces of information.

The Title	The title of a book provides a good indication of the content (eg. "The Psychology of Learning", "Accounting: A Direct Approach", "Taking Great Pictures with your Digital Camera" etc.).
The Dust Jacket	The Dust Jacket is the cover of the book and usually summarises the scope of the work and gives information about the author, testimonials etc.
The Table of Contents	This provides you with considerable information about the book. It reveals how the material is presented and how much emphasis the author has placed on certain topics by showing the number of pages devoted to each theme.
The Preface	This usually tells how the author has approached the subject matter and provides an overview of all major topics covered. Often an explanation will be given regarding the purpose of the work and why the author has adopted this approach to organising the material.
The Index	The index (at the rear of the publication) is like a comprehensive table of contents. The index alphabetically lists Key Words taken from the body of the text with page references to their occurrence in the book.
Publication Details	Often overlooked, the publication details tell you the Author(s), Publication Date(s) and revisions. This information can put the work into an overall context.
References	Checking the references gives further information about the work (eg. who does the author cite in the work). Some works provide a separate Author Index that lists all the authors cited in the work with page references.
Appendices	Appendices are supplementary information such as tables, charts, data etc. that are referred to in the body of the work.

The Anatomy of Journals

Journals are publications written by and for researchers and scholars from within a particular discipline. Most disciplines (eg. Physics, Psychology, Economics etc.) generate research literature that is published in Journals as well as books. The articles reproduced in journals (eg. "Nature", "Science" etc.) usually present the most recent research being conducted throughout the world. Consequently journals are an important mechanism in communicating current knowledge and best practice to other interested professionals (including students!).

The structure of journal articles differs slightly from that of books and may also vary from discipline to discipline. Typically a journal will contain the following information.

Journal Name	This indicates which main discipline is responsible for publication of the article (eg. "Journal of Experimental Psychology").
Article Name	This conveys information about the specific branch of the discipline and details of the topic being discussed (eg. "Retrieval of Words from Long Term Memory").
Abstract/Synopsis/Summary	This is usually the first part of the article and is supposed to be a summary of the entire article revealing the main points covered (eg. rationale, design [if an experiment], findings, discussion, conclusions etc.). Most Journals publish a volume of Abstracts on an annual basis to assist researchers in finding relevant information.
Publication Details	As with books, this provides you with information about the Author(s), Publication Date as well as identifying information (Publication, Volume, Page References etc.).
References	The same applies here as for books.

The same general rules also apply to other reference publications such as gazettes, yearbooks, monographs, government publications etc.

3. Reading Strategies

The following are suggested reading strategies designed to match specific reading goals.

Try applying these to your future reading tasks.

Reading for an Overview

The intention here is to swiftly cover the material and determine whether it is useful for your purpose. The main technique used here is called *Surveying*. Surveying is a strategy that lets you obtain a limited overview of an entire piece without reading in detail. The procedure relies upon your understanding of the anatomy of a book or journal, as discussed earlier.

The steps for Surveying involve:

1. Look at the Title, Dust Jacket, and Table of Contents.
This will tell you what information is covered in the work.
2. Read the Preface or Introduction to determine the dominant themes presented in the work.
3. Read the chapter headings and sub-headings and the opening and closing paragraphs of each chapter (for a book), or Abstract/Synopsis and sub-headings (for a journal article).



Getting the Main Ideas

Extracting the main themes requires an approach that delivers a general understanding of the propositions presented in the publication. The approach used is similar to that used for gaining an overview except that you will be looking for *Key Words*. Key Words (and phrases) are those that are central to the topic and which contribute to your understanding of the material.



1. Survey to get an overview. This allows you to become familiar with the scope of the material and will make it easier to identify the main points as they are presented.
2. "Skim" through the material looking for sections that provide information about the main ideas. The technique of "skimming" involves looking for information that may be useful by letting your eyes glance quickly over the text and stopping to read important passages in greater detail.
3. Identify the Key Words/Phrases that contribute to your understanding of the topic. Read these sections in detail.

Finding Information

Finding specific information is similar to reading for the main ideas except you are focussing only on points of interest and ignoring the rest. Finding information frequently involves searching through a large number of references and therefore relies heavily on Surveying and Skimming. The main factor in finding specific information is to know about what you are seeking in advance.



1. Generate a list of questions that you hope to answer through your reading.
2. Survey to determine whether the material is useful. If it is then skim through looking for Key Words/Phrases which answer your questions. Use the Index to locate specific Key Words.
3. Read and, if necessary, re-read specific passages which contain the information you require.
4. Generate additional questions that need to be answered and repeat this entire process.

Gaining Mastery

Gaining mastery of the information contained in books and articles requires considerable effort and a solid, systematic, strategic approach. An effective study technique to use here is called **SQ3R**. This stands for **S**urvey, **Q**uestion, **R**ead, **R**ecall, and **R**evise and includes some of the techniques discussed earlier.

Survey	Surveying is as described above. Surveying gives you an overview of the material so that you can decide which information needs to be learnt in detail.
Question	Decide what things you don't understand from your initial survey. Write down specific questions that you hope to answer through your reading. Generating questions means that you have specific goals to satisfy by reading.
Read	Read through the material with the intention of answering the questions you raised and identifying the main ideas. Always try to anticipate what the author is about to cover. This is Active Reading and it will make it easier for you to remember the points you cover. You may need to re-read any passages that are difficult to follow. Re-reading is useful because it reinforces the main points and allows you to examine supporting arguments and examples in greater detail. You may wish to take notes whilst you are reading. This is fine as long as you don't use note taking as a substitute for understanding. Some students constantly break their concentration and reading flow by stopping to take notes. Try to postpone any note taking to coincide with the end of a section, then attempt to recall the main points.
Recall	If you are going to remember the material you read then it is necessary to test yourself on comprehension. Without recalling the information you are likely to forget most very quickly (within minutes of reading). Systematically recall your material on a section-by-section basis. Plan your reading by setting the points in the book where you will stop and recall. Use the questions you generated to quiz your understanding. If you have difficulty recalling then go back and re-read! Do not proceed unless you are sure you understand since most written information builds progressively and failing to understand earlier material can cause problems later in the book.
Review	Reviewing is basically a combination of the above four steps. Re-examine the material by Surveying the general structure and ideas, raise questions and see if you can answer them, then re-read any passages which have slipped your memory. Reviewing is most effective if done on a regular basis. The best times for review are immediately after you have covered the material, and at one or two regular intervals before you are required to demonstrate your understanding. As with Recall, without reviewing your material you will find that the main points will soon be forgotten.