

Academic Reading and Note-Making

How can I read more effectively?

1. Improve Comprehension

“Active” reading occurs when you are fully engaged: paying attention, pausing to reflect, and stopping when your mind wanders. This is different from having your eyes “reading” but your brain not connected! Use the **SQ4R** Method.

Survey

Get an overview of the book, chapter, or article first: structure? titles? subtitles? headings? graphics? glossary? review questions? Read the introduction (any text prior to the first heading, or abstract or learning objectives) and the summary or discussion to find the main ideas.

Question

Go to start of the chapter. Make up questions as you read, to maintain interest and focus. Use headings or bolded words, or ask “why?” Don’t worry about asking the “right” questions, the main point is to engage.

Read & React

Now read one section or subtopic at a time, to find the answer to your questions. At the end of the section react: Stop & Think about the main points, and then make notes, or highlight only the key ideas.

Recite

Read and then try to recite your notes at the end of the larger section or unit. Look for the “big picture” or connections among thoughts.

Review

Review briefly at the end of the session, and before you begin reading the subsequent material.

2. Increase Retention

Note-making increases retention for what you are reading. It is a tool for exam preparation and research.

Effective notes

- * are written in your own words, with precise definitions or formula also included
- * provide a framework for organization
- * distinguish between main and secondary points, and finer details
- * enable you to see connections between ideas, and overall structure of material

3. Make Notes

Cornell Method

Add a “cue column” beside your usual summary notes (a vertical column @ 1/4 of the page wide). Use the cue column to add structure beside the relevant notes: sub-titles, definitions, key words, graphics, formula.. Test yourself by covering your summary notes, and asking questions based on cues.

Mind Maps

Mindmaps or webs are a “whole brain” strategy that will increase your focus and depth of thinking while you read. They’re fun to make with colour and graphics, and help distinguish between primary, secondary and supporting ideas.

Concept Summary in Math and Science

Frequently occurring key ideas should be learned deeply and well. Concept summary notes written from the text or lab manual include (e.g.) title, allowable key formula, definitions, additional important information, simple examples, relevant knowns and unknowns. Summarize the information in a chart for rapid reference or review..

4. Speed Up

- * Understand the purpose in reading before you start: quick overview? details of lab procedure? supplement lecture? literary analysis?
- * Read phrases or groups of words, not each word individually.
- * Observe your eye movements: do you re-read every few words, moving eyes forward and back? Try to move eyes forward in the text.
- * Calculate your speed (average time per page) for different readings, to set reasonable estimates of time required for the task. Record and track this.

Try these strategies

Pace Yourself

Use a pointer, or finger, to guide your eyes along the text, at a speed that challenges you slightly. Ultimately, you may be able to use your peripheral vision more, and point only sporadically.

Learn to Skim

Focus on getting the gist of the meaning and the context, rather than every detail. Poor or slow readers are often afraid something essential will be missed– it may be more important to get the big picture.

Build Your Vocabulary

Develop a personal dictionary of unfamiliar terms, and review frequently. Include 2 definitions: i) formal, and ii) paraphrased.

Heighten Your Concentration

Anticipate and reduce distractions, rather than trying to resist temptations. TURN OFF the technology, read sitting up in good light, and take short breaks (10 minutes every hour).

Trouble Shooting Guide

I spend a lot of time reading, but I can't remember much.

There's too much to read at university to remember everything. That's why **making notes** as you read helps. It takes time now, but saves time (and stress!) because you'll have something to study from, and won't need to re-read the whole text before exams.

I get overwhelmed in detail. How do I know what's important?

It's normal to feel lost in detail! But there are ways to find order and structure, and to identify the main ideas. Make notes after you've read a sub-topic, so you see where the section is heading. Try using a mindmap or hierarchical note to see how ideas are connected. What is a "topic"? What is a "point"? What is "evidence or example"? What is "interpretation"? Sub-topics?

I worry that if I skim read, I'll miss an important point.

This is a common concern. For most of your readings, skimming happens in the SURVEY stage of the SQ4R process. Skimming provides you with a road map and helps you get the big picture, so you don't get swamped in detail. If you find you don't understand a basic concept for the REVIEW stage, you can go back then with a clear purpose for re-reading.

Reading Tips for ESL Students

Reading can be a significant concern for non-native English speakers, due to the volume, complexity and unfamiliarity of the material. Improving your reading may also benefit your writing skills, so the time spent is very worthwhile. Common problems include:

Weak vocabulary

If you struggle with unfamiliar academic words, then start your own personal dictionary. If unfamiliar common words slow your reading, then try to get the meaning from the context, and use that word often.

Long, complicated sentences

Focus on chunks you understand, and try to make sense of the whole sentence using contextual cues.

Speed too slow

Use titles and headings to increase the meaning of the passage. Don't go back for more detail. Try to identify main ideas, about one per paragraph.

Identifying the main ideas

Spend time looking at the organization of the text or article, before reading it. Learning objectives, headings, bold print and review questions can help you identify the main ideas.

Critical reading is required

Read and talk with a partner. Distinguish facts (look for evidence and data) from opinion. Give yourself more time to think as you read. Break complex arguments into sub-sections.

Reading is not rewarding or is “just hard work”

Each day try to read non-academic material at a low level of difficulty, to boost your confidence. Increase your pleasure by finding material similar to what you enjoyed reading at home.

Go to lc.ust.hk/~sac/advice/_english/reading workshops

Find more tools and strategies at

<http://www.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/undergrad/reading/module.html> or

<http://www.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/grad/reading.html>