Section 4
Effective Reading

Introduction
This section will give you some tips and guidance on how to be more effective when you read, in order to capitalise on the time that you spend reading. As you are no doubt aware, reading is one of the key activities that you have to do at University and, as you know, it can be very time consuming. Whilst it is not possible to avoid reading, there are certain skills which you can learn to apply to make you a more effective reader. One of the main differences between reading for academic purposes and reading for pleasure is that you have to be actively involved in the process of reading. It is not a passive process: you have to engage with the literature in order to understand what you are reading and get the most out of it. The key point about reading is not about memory but about understanding.

This section will identify some of the things to avoid when you are reading for University and will equip you with some skills to make you more effective readers. On a cautionary note, reading, like writing, is a very personalised skill; don’t panic or feel threatened when other people tell you how they do it. People work out their own strategies, which may not work for you. Ultimately the most effective method will be the one that you are most comfortable with.

Academic Literature
One of the main differences when you are reading literature for a course of this level is that the style of academic writing is often much more dense and contains jargon and theoretical terminology, and different theorists often write in a very complex manner.
Remember that academic writing is not necessarily straightforward nor is it just narrative, precisely because its purpose is to construct an argument and to persuade others of its merit.

The Purpose of Reading

The underlying purpose of reading is to develop your thoughts, to weave new ideas and information into the understanding you already have and to give new angles to your thinking.

If you try to bypass this thinking process, you are not really learning as you read. Learning is to do with changing your ideas, combining them together in new ways and extending them to cover new ground. Reading a text is one way in which you trigger off these changes.

The purpose of reading is not to have a lot of words pass in front of your eyes, nor to add a few new items to a long ‘list’ of information in your mind. It is to engage your ideas and make you rethink them.

(Northedge, 1990:34, emphasis in original)

Your Attitude to the Reading

One of the main factors in how you read is your attitude to the reading material itself, as this will greatly influence how you read. In turn, what you are reading will influence your attitude towards it. If you are reading material that you do not want to read or if you are reading material that you have to read, and you have got lots to get through, then you may not feel particularly positive about it. If you do not have a positive attitude towards your reading then this will influence how you actually read the material. So try to read with a positive attitude – although if you have got lots to get through it can seem quite difficult to remain positive towards it all!
Reactions to Reading

According to Andrew Northedge (1990), there are six factors which can influence your reactions to the reading:

1. Feelings about reading
   - do you enjoy reading generally?
   - do you look forward to reading?
   - do you see it an unnecessarily time consuming task?

2. Your attitude towards the topic you are reading about
   - is it a topic with which you are familiar with?
   - is it something new to you?
   - is it an area which you feel passionately about?
   - do you disagree with the author’s take on the topic?
   - are you indifferent to the material you are reading?

3. Irritation with the language
   - does the author use very specialised terminology?
   - does the material have a heavy use of jargon?
   - does the language prevent you from being able to understand what exactly the author is trying to say?

4. Frustration with the style
   - does the author use very long sentences and paragraphs?
   - does the author use very short staccato sentences?
   - is the style of the writing off putting to understanding the content of the material?

5. Disagreeing with the author
   - do you disagree with the arguments made by the author?
   - do you think the author’s evidence is unconvincing?
   - do you think the author has misrepresented the position of others in order to construct their theory?

6. Feelings and motivation
   - why are you reading the material in the first place?
   - is it for a particular essay or class or is it general background reading?
   - do you want to read the literature?
   - are you enjoying reading the material?
Therefore, if you are enthusiastic about what you are reading it can help maintain your interest. Or if the author has constructed a theory that you strongly agree with or equally, strongly disagree with, then you will be much more interested in reading this and your interest should be maintained. However if you are indifferent to what you are reading, or if you find the subject matter uninteresting, then this will make reading very boring and it will be hard to sustain your interest. Additionally, if you find it hard to understand what the author is writing, either through poor writing or because you do not understand the concepts and theories, then this also can make you lose interest. However, if you are struggling due to the other reasons, there are techniques to help you and keep you motivated.

**Strategies for Reading Effectively**

**Context**
The context of where you are reading will affect how you are able to read. Therefore you will have to create an environment that is conducive to concentrated reading. In order to do this you will have to think about a number of things.

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<th>Where are you reading?</th>
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<td>1. If you are reading in the library, make sure that your mobile phone is turned off.</td>
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<td>2. If you go in with your friends, do not sit together at group tables – the temptation will be to talk, not read.</td>
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<td>3. Make sure you have all the material that you need so you are not constantly getting up and down.</td>
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<td>4. If you are reading at home, make sure you have a surface that is big enough to hold your reading material and that you can write on comfortably.</td>
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<td>5. Turn off your mobile phone and turn off the TV and stereo (unless some quiet background music helps you concentrate).</td>
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<td>6. Let the others in your house know that you are reading and that you need to concentrate so they will not interrupt you.</td>
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<td>7. Appreciate that academic reading requires concentration and active participation.</td>
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Motivation

One of the things that you will need to have to be an effective reader is the motivation to want to read. In order to increase or sustain your motivation you have to:

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<tr>
<td>1. Start your reading when you planned on starting it – do not put it off.</td>
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<td>2. Plan regular breaks into your reading schedule. For instance, it is difficult to concentrate for over 40 minutes at a time so read for forty minutes and then have a ten minute break - but do not let the time of your break exceed the time of your reading.</td>
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<td>3. Stick to the timetable that you have set yourself - and do not constantly create and recreate timetables. Make one and then stick to it.</td>
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<td>4. Treat yourself after you have completed the task that you have set yourself.</td>
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Targets

A good method for staying motivated and helping you stay on track is to set yourself targets. At University you will have many tasks, assignments and presentations to complete so it is good to arrange your workload into manageable and do-able sizes. You will have to be your own time manger so you will have to think about a number of things:
Managing Time

It is always a good idea to try to manage your time effectively so that you make optimum use of the time available to you (see also Section 2). In order to plan your time efficiently you have to be aware of some other issues:

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**Targets**

1. What are your overall goals? i.e. getting through the first year, passing all of your exams and assignments.
2. What are your immediate priorities - such as when are your first essays due and when are your first set of exams?
3. Are the results that you are getting as good as you should be getting?
4. Set targets but be realistic. So, set yourself targets for reading, such as a couple of chapters in your allotted reading time. Do not overestimate what you can get through as you will only overwhelm yourself and then worry if you don’t get through the material.
5. Reflect on how much you can realistically read and digest. Once you have read your first few articles or chapters you will get a better idea of how long it takes you to read different things, and how this varies depending on what you are reading. If, for example, you are reading dense theoretical work written in a field that is unfamiliar to you then this will take you a lot longer than reading about an area that you are already knowledgeable in.
6. Reset you targets after reflection, if you need to. Once you become more familiar with your reading style and how long it takes you, you can reset your targets to suit. Indeed you may find that once you get ‘into the swing’ your reading time speeds up. Equally, however, if you are continuously reading new material then you may find that you have to set aside longer periods of time to complete the reading.

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*Managing Time*

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**Time Management**

1. Be aware of future commitments so that you can compensate for them in your time plan.
2. Use the course guides that you have so that you know when the essay deadlines are in this term and the next and so that you know when your exams are.
3. Break down each assignment and give yourself time to do all the necessary tasks for it, such as: searching the library catalogue; getting the books from the library; and giving yourself time to read the books and articles before you have to take them back. Then you can write the essay or plan the presentation and so on.
4. Work out when is the best time of day for you to concentrate so that you can use this time for reading, as effective reading requires maximum concentration.
5. When you set yourself time periods for reading do not make them too short or else you will not be able to read lengthy pieces; this may make you anxious that you are not getting through all the material.

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To 'manage' your reading effectively you have to keep:

1. Defining reading tasks and setting yourself targets
   (e.g. number of pages to read this evening)
2. Monitoring your progress on the reading task, and then
3. Re-setting your targets in the light of this.

(Northedge, 1990:36)
Speed of Reading

How quickly you can read is an issue that most students worry about. You will undoubtedly think that everyone can read faster than you, but don’t worry about this. This speed of your reading will depend on:

Northedge (1990) explains that there are three variables that will influence how quickly you read something, which are:

- what you are reading,
- how you are reading and
- the purpose of the reading

Factors that Influence your Speed

1. What you already know about the subject you are studying,
2. How difficult the text is, and
3. How thoroughly you need to understand it.

(Northedge, 1990)

The speed of your reading will depend on how you read, which can be split into three discrete types of reading. You can use a combination of the three methods.

Types of Reading:

1. Scanning
   To look over an article to see if your eyes pick out key words or
As a technique before you do any critical reading you should scan the article first, then read the headings and then start to read more reflectively. You must engage with the reading in order to really understand the arguments being made. To actively read and engage with the reading you must think about the following points:

Reflective Reading

1. Collecting Information
   What do you want to know about?

2. Questioning the Author
   What exactly is the author's argument?

3. Form Your Own Opinion
   Use what you have read to either agree or disagree with the author and to think critically about other material you have read.
Questions

Try to have some questions about what you are reading. Keep these questions in mind when you are reading and read the article with a thought to answering them. If you are writing an essay, write down the questions you want answered and refer to them when you are reading. Keep them in your vision so that you can actually see them.

Jargon

Technical words and jargon may be off putting or seem unnecessary but these are terms specific to your discipline. Academics communicate their thoughts and ideas through language and specifically written language. This is how they engage with each other and produce theory and counter theory. Therefore specialist language cannot be avoided and it is essential to have a working knowledge of the vocabulary that is used in your discipline. Therefore, as well as using a dictionary, it is worthwhile using a specialised dictionary, for example, a Sociology or Politics dictionary. This will be useful as it will explain different theories and give the names of associated authors. As you become more familiar and confident with your work you will use the terminology more yourself.

You may feel that it interrupts the flow of your reading to stop to look up words in dictionaries but if the same words keep appearing then it will be better to take a couple of minutes to look them up. You can also take a note of the word or page where it appears and after reading the article look the word up then. Use the Glossary (in the Appendix) and add new words into it with a brief definition, as this will help the meaning stick in your head.

Getting ‘Stuck’

If you are reading an article but are struggling to understand it then it may be because of two reasons. Firstly, it could be because the author has not written it very well and it is difficult to follow what the author is trying to say. Secondly, and this is probably the more common reason, you cannot understand the author’s arguments because they are too theoretical and you are not familiar with the theories, or, in relation to this,
because it is too full of jargon or specialist terminology and you do not understand the concepts. In order to overcome getting ‘stuck’ like this there are a number of techniques that you can apply.

Always find an active way of tackling the problem. If you cannot comprehend the language, look up your specialist dictionary and read about the concepts first. Similarly use a dictionary if words are used that you are unfamiliar with. However if you cannot follow the author’s argument, then there are a number of strategies you can employ.

**Strategies for Getting Un/Stuck:**

1. Check the title again.
2. If it is a journal, read the abstract again and look for 'keywords'.
3. If it is a book, read the contents page as you should be able to see where the author is going with the arguments.
4. Re-read the introduction as this should lay down the points the author is making.
5. Re-read what you have read once you have done this to see if it helps illuminate the text.
6. Look ahead in the article or chapter or book to see the point at which the author ends up.
7. Read the conclusion as this should summarise the key points made by the author.
8. Write down and summarise what you think the author is saying - with the various points noted alongside an explanation of them.
9. Lastly, if you are really stuck and none of this helps, then LEAVE it, read something else and then return to it later as perhaps once you have read something else on the subject it will become clearer to you. You can then tackle the original piece again.
Selecting Reading Material

At University, it is not expected that you read everything ever written on a given topic. Therefore you will have to narrow down what resources you read. In order to make decisions about whether the material is relevant and useful you should consider the following points:

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**Selecting Reading Material**

1. Look at name, date and title of publication: is it relevant, or out of date?
2. Read the editor’s preface, backcover or abstract to see whether it is relevant.
3. Read the introduction - is it relevant?
4. Look at the contents and index to see how the author has written about the topic. Sometimes titles can be misleading and by using the contents and index page you can get a better idea of the relevance of it.
5. Look at the author's bibliography - to see the range of sources.
6. Read summaries and abstracts.

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*How to Find Sources*

When you doing your reading for your essays or exams, sometimes your lecturer will give you a reading list with the relevant reading on it. However, you will often need to find additional resources that you have to locate yourself. This demonstrates the use of initiative in locating other sources of information and will help you write a better essay than only using the set texts. There are a number of ways to locate resources for your reading:
How to Find Sources
1. Use the reading list provided, if there is one.
2. Use the library catalogue.
3. Use a general textbook or reader.
4. Use the Web but be cautious and specific in your search.
5. Look about in the library at the related shelves.
6. Look through the Electronic Journals available through the library catalogue.
7. Ask your colleagues what sources they are using.
8. Ask your lecturer for recommendations.
9. Use the bibliographies and references in the relevant material that you already have.

How to Read

When you are reading it is useful to always think about the following points:

Issues to Think About
1. What is the title?
   - What does it tell you about the topic?
   - What do you already know about the subject?
   - What do you expect the author to say about it? i.e. do you know what the authors' ideological position is?
2. When was the material written?
   - This is particularly relevant if you are looking at historical sources or doing an historical analysis i.e. what was the situation then?
3. Who wrote it?
   - Are you familiar with the author's other work?
   - Do you know their ideological or political affiliations?
4. What do you want to get from the material?
   - General background?
   - Specific theory/arguments?
**Reading ‘Difficult’ Material**

If you are reading ‘difficult’ material then use the following points as a guide to aid you:

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<tr>
<th>Reading ‘Difficult’ Material</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Read the title.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Read the abstract or summary if there is one.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Read the introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Look for Key Words.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Look for the main ideas: Titles, subheadings etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Look up words that are new to you – either as you go or at the end of the reading.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Reread if you have not grasped the key points.</td>
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**Readers**

Readers are excellent resources to use because they contain shortened versions of authors’ key works. They often have an introduction which explains the author’s theoretical position and the particular argument that they are making in the article. This can often clarify or illuminate what the article is about and make it easier to follow. Readers contain literature from a number of leading academics in a particular area. Therefore if you reading about a new topic, see if there is a Reader and look through it. It will give you a comprehensive overview of the ‘type’ of literature written on the topic and will familiarise you with the authors in the field. However you must not restrict yourself to only using the Reader and no other sources.

**Remembering**

Remembering what you have read can be problematic - although it is worthwhile to note that reading is not intended to be a memory test. However, it is pointless to read if you are not going to recall what the article was about or what the author’s argument was. This is precisely why we have to take notes – which is the subject of the next section.