Reading Techniques

Throughout your career as a student you will be required to read a variety of texts and to gather material from them for assignments. Here are some guidelines for effective reading.

1. Preview

Preview the text to be read by skimming it. Skimming is the technique of allowing your eyes to travel rapidly over a page, stopping here and there to register the main idea. When skimming, you should follow the procedure below, adapting it to your purpose:

- Read the title.
- Note the writer's name.
- Note the date and place of publication.
- Read the first paragraph completely.
- Read sub-headings and first sentences of remaining paragraphs.

As you read, pick up main ideas, key words (words that tell you who, what, when, where, how many, and how much), and transition markers (words like 'however', 'alternatively', 'additionally', and so on), which suggest the direction of ideas in the text.

2. Question

Effective reading is active reading. To turn reading from a passive into an active exercise, always ask questions.

To do this, you must be clear about the purpose of your reading. If you are reading a text which you will be critiquing in detail, your questions will be different from those you would
ask if you were reading a number of texts for background information. If you are gathering material for an essay, formulate some tentative ideas about the approaches you might take, modifying them as you accumulate material.

During the preview, note as many questions as you can about the content. For instance, turn headings into questions and try to anticipate possible answers the writer may offer. Always actively look for connections and relationships. Look at the ways ideas are structured and developed.

The object of the preview and questioning steps is to determine the writer's thesis, that is, her/his main idea and purpose in writing.

As you read, list all the words about which you are uncertain; look them up in the dictionary and write down their definitions.

3. Take notes

Some reasons for taking notes are:

- to maintain attentiveness as you read,
- to focus your attention,
- to familiarise yourself with primary and secondary material on a given subject,
- to analyse the assumptions and rhetorical strategies of the writer,
- to provide you with a summary of the material.

Some hints for taking notes:

- Always record bibliographical details of the text from which you are taking notes.
- Write on one side of the paper only.
- Leave a wide margin for comments and cross-references.
- Use headings, subheadings, and diagrams.
- Keep notes brief but full enough to still make sense to you in six months' time. Make sure they're legible.
4. Summarise

A summary is a collation of your notes, recording the main points the writer makes. Making a summary from your notes has two main benefits.

- It allows you to test yourself on your understanding of the material you have been reading - sometimes it is only when you try to put the writer's ideas into your own words that you uncover difficulties.
- It provides you with a compact account of the text for further reference.

5. Review and reflect

To capitalise fully on the time you've spent reading an article or chapter, it's important to review and reflect upon what you've read. This enhances your understanding and helps you to commit important facts and ideas to your long-term memory.

Here are some review and reflection exercises you may find useful:

- Test your understanding of the material by trying to answer your preview questions without referring to your notes.
- Write down the meaning and usefulness the material has for understanding other concepts and principles. Indicate what other ideas the material substantiates, contradicts, or amplifies.
- Evaluate the text in terms of its informativeness, soundness of argument, relevance, and so on. If you are gathering material for an essay or report, decide which points you want to use and think about how you can use them.
- Start a reading journal in which you keep all reading, review, and reflection notes.