Tip Sheet Reading and Note-taking

As a university student you’ll need to read extensively to understand your subject and to complete your assessments. Do you need help with developing a systematic approach to reading and note-taking? If so, follow these guidelines for developing effective reading and note-taking strategies.

This tip sheet introduces you to reading for academic purposes, and overviews a number of reading techniques you can use in your studies. It also provides some handy tips for effective note-taking at university.

Reading

Firstly, decide on your purpose for reading. This could include:

- Gaining a general overview of a chapter to prepare for a lecture or tutorial
- Finding specific information to answer a question/solve a problem
- Preparing for an assignment/exam

Knowing the purpose of your reading will also help you decide how much detail is required, and the amount of time you should devote to each task. It will also determine the reading strategies you employ.

Let’s look at these reading strategies in more detail:

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<th>Skimming</th>
<th>Scanning</th>
<th>Reading for detail</th>
<th>Reading critically</th>
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<td><strong>When and why do it?</strong></td>
<td>In the beginning - To decide if the article looks relevant.</td>
<td>In the beginning - To find specific information, or key words.</td>
<td>Once the article is deemed relevant - to identify arguments and evidence in support of your own arguments.</td>
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<td><strong>How do you do it?</strong></td>
<td>Read quickly to establish usefulness or to get an overview of the main ideas, content and purpose.</td>
<td>Scan quickly for specific information.</td>
<td>Read slowly, paying attention to detail. You may need to revisit the text to get all the information you need or to consolidate understanding.</td>
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<td><strong>What do you focus on?</strong></td>
<td>Skim read the topic sentences (usually the first sentence) of each paragraph to get an overview of the key ideas, or skim read the different sections of a journal article (title, author, abstract, introduction, discussion and conclusion).</td>
<td>Scan for relevant sections of a text and read only as much as you need to find specific information.</td>
<td>The main arguments, supporting evidence, evaluation of content.</td>
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Reading for detail involves a number of steps:
1. Re-read the dense/main parts of the text after you’ve identified the main argument to extract any supporting evidence, or to evaluate the content. Read slowly, paying attention to detail. You may need to revisit the text to get all the information you need or to consolidate understanding. Use active reading techniques to improve concentration and retention: Steps 2 and 3.
2. Annotate the text, by underlining or highlighting key ideas, or making notes in the margin
3. Summarise as you read (using your own words when making notes)
4. Analyse the content as you read by connecting related ideas and identifying key principles

Reading Critically
- For more information about reading critically, see the guide for ‘Analysing and Thinking Critically’.
- Download and complete the ‘Evaluating a journal article worksheet’ for each journal article that you read.

Notetaking
The next question to ask yourself is “How can I make the most of my reading by taking effective notes?”

Taking well-organised notes can help you to stay focussed while reading and gives you a clear record of what you’ve read. Some general tips include:
- Don’t write down everything. Keep your focus in mind.
- Record reference details of the source before you start taking notes so you won’t forget later.
- Develop a clear system for note-taking so you can easily distinguish ideas which are you own, from those you’ve paraphrased or are direct quotations.
- Stop reading after 30 minutes, and summarise in your own words what you’ve read.
- Take breaks when reading longer texts and don’t expect to understand complex concepts in one reading. It will be easier to understand the next time you read it.
- Try using diagrams, illustrations, colours or examples to highlight main concepts.
- Ensure you leave white space between notes so you can add more information or elaborate on points later.
- Consider using abbreviations or symbols to save time. You can use commonly used abbreviations (e.g. +ve for positive), but it’s also a good idea to develop your own for your discipline specific vocabulary.

Remember! There are a variety of note-taking techniques you can try e.g. the Cornell System, mind mapping. Make sure you choose one that works for you.

Contact
If you have any questions about this material, please contact ECU’s Learning Advisers at learningadviser@ecu.edu.au