Reading Effectively

For most students the amount of reading expected at the tertiary level comes as a shock and the seemingly long reading lists can appear quite daunting.

The important thing is to become selective about your reading, to identify the most relevant references and to read in a selective way the sections which will be useful for your purpose.

Being aware of your own reading style and preferences can assist you in adapting to the various types of reading material, and in making decisions about how you will go about reading them.

Deciding how to read

As part of an 'active' approach to reading you need to 'decide' how you are going to approach the text and what strategies you will use. This will depend upon your 'purpose' or more specifically 'what you want to get out of reading the text'.

The following are common purposes and appropriate strategies that can be used;

Enjoyment

Novels and magazines as well as texts may be read for entertainment and relaxation. As the purpose is to enjoy in the present rather than to remember or evaluate, the reading speed is usually fast. It is sometimes surprising how much incidental information can be recalled from this style of reading and used in other situations.

Getting an overview

When you are given an extensive reading list for an assignment or need to choose between texts, then you will skim to determine;

- Whether the material is relevant or useful and if it is up to date
- What type of treatment of the topic is provided (balanced or biased, and at what depth)

You can achieve these by: noting the date of publication and revisions if any; examining the contents for areas covered; skimming through chapters and sections; and noting the headings and reading first and last paragraphs of sections

Finding specific information

You may be trying to locate evidence for a particular argument, the solution to a problem, or details about a particular person or event. A common strategy involves more thoroughly scanning the index and content pages for key words, and reading relevant sections.

Identifying the central idea or theme

This will be your purpose when you are trying to identify a major finding in a report of an experiment, or trying to find the key issue in a social, political or historical discussion paper. To achieve this purpose,

- Scan the relevant sections noting headings
- Read the first and last paragraphs more carefully as these will provide summary information
- And then read the whole section or text carefully using the signpost words or phrases that may indicate main ideas ('firstly', 'secondly') and evidence or examples ('evidenced by', 'illustrated by').
Develop a detailed and critical understanding

In this case you will wish to understand a whole book or article, be able to relate the various points, follow the argument that is presented and evaluate the perspective given. Being familiar not only with ideas but also with the 'context' in which the book or article is written, will be important.

- When was it published?
- What is the author's background?
- Are there any obvious biases? (eg. areas left out)
- Is a balanced perspective provided? (ie. both sides of the argument)

A detailed understanding does not mean that you will read every word, rather that you will decide on the relevant material, read it actively, asking questions as you read and being critical of the material and the perspective presented.

Dealing with complex reading material

If you find that the book is difficult to understand try re-reading slowly. If it still appears too difficult try to find an introductory text on the subject, one which will give you a simple overview as a starter, then proceed to more complex texts which are more specific and detailed. On reference lists for assignments there is often a general text recommended which will serve this purpose. If not, ask your lecturer to suggest one as a starting point.

If you are new to a subject area you may find the language and usage of some terms difficult to understand. It is helpful to;

Note frequently occurring terminology

Look up words in a dictionary (preferably in a specialised one for your subject area)

Try to become familiar with these words by explaining the meaning to a friend and using them in assignments

Be alert to the usage of these terms in lectures, tutorials and practicals as well.

Immerse yourself in the language, discuss it with others, and ask teaching staff about words you do not understand.

Making notes from reading

Prior to taking notes:

- Skim the chapter or section, noting headings, and alerting yourself to the direction the chapter will take
- Read carefully the first and last paragraphs, which will give you an overview.

When taking notes:

- Try to be as concise as possible, putting information in 'your own words'. If you are copying large slabs of information directly you are unlikely to be understanding the material.
- Note the authors use of 'sign posts', these may be:
  - Words in *italics* - phrases in **HEAVY PRINT**
  - Or words that indicate major points and examples to follow.

The first or last sentence in a paragraph can often give a summary of the main points. Authors tend to use a consistent style, so identify this early and use it to focus on major points.
Taking notes not only provides a summary for quick recall of information later, but also forces you to organise information and check your understanding at the time of reading.

Reading actively means being aware of the approach you are taking, using a strategy and reading with a purpose in mind and having questions for which you are seeking answers.

Assistance in these areas and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 Monday through Friday, between 9am and 5pm.