

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF READING

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

-- Francis Bacon

Students need to read efficiently so they can get through all the material they're asked to deal with. It isn't really a matter of reading fast, but of focussing selectively, then understanding and remembering what you've read. Here are some tips on reading different kinds of material in appropriate ways. (See also our Advice files [A System for Dealing with New Words while Reading](#) and [Taking Notes from Research Reading](#).)

Textbooks

Textbooks can repay intensive reading, usually in some parts more than others. Note the signals from your professor or TA about what sections are most relevant, and know how each section contributes to the course, especially to the key concepts, issues, and questions in the course. Even before reading, become aware of the **structure** of the text. Look at the chapter titles, headings and subheadings first: they name the **concepts** (or large ideas) in the course and indicate ways of thinking about them. You can often gain focus, too, by skimming through the whole thing first, noting what aspects of the subject seem to get space and attention. Then read through the text with care, noticing especially **definitions** and **examples** of the important concepts. Look also for accounts of **disagreement** and for references to current questions and **issues** in the discipline.

Mark up only key passages in the text; don't rely on only underlining or highlighting. Use marginal symbols to show different kinds of points (e.g., asterisks for definitions, arrows for examples). Write brief summarizing notes in your own words, outlining the main ideas and the sequence of the explanation. That forces you to process the material in your own mind, and it helps you review later.

Primary Sources

Read through each literary work or historical document with attention to your own **responses** and **questions**. "Stickies" will let you express these on the spot without spoiling the pages. Many people find it useful, immediately after a first reading, to write out a brief journal account of their reading experience.

A quick re-reading of the work will then let you note how themes or techniques have developed through the work as a whole or how your questions were answered: use light annotations to show these patterns. Focus on some specific details and ask yourself why they're there and what they mean.

Research Readings

Be sure to focus your efforts before plunging in. In going through sources for a research essay, you are looking for ways to answer a research question you have formulated. Start by going through your textbooks, notes, and perhaps an encyclopaedia or other reference work to get background knowledge and survey the types of **questions** and **issues** being discussed. Now you want **information** to support or modify your original view of the topic, and others' **opinions** to bolster or to challenge your own outlook.

Use efficient **scanning** techniques to help choose the most useful sources for your purpose:

- For **books**, flip through the preface, table of contents and index to see the general outlook and argument. Then start reading sections on your own topic. If you see useful material, expand your reading to establish the context for ideas you might want to analyse in detail. (Never quote or paraphrase without understanding the context.)
- **Journal articles** usually outline their argument within the first page. Read the abstract first to see if the article will be of use to you. If you decide to read it, look through to see what gets attention, pausing over any charts or graphs. For a heavy scientific article, you may also want to investigate a specific section of the paper, perhaps the introduction or conclusion, but more likely the results or even just the tables and figures. Then read through the whole paper, noting for instance how the details in the body of the paper support the points made in the introduction or conclusion, or how those sections relate to what you have seen in the presentation of results.
- Be especially careful of **Internet sources**. Check that a Web document, for instance, is written or published by an accepted authority on the topic. (Find the home page of the site by cutting off the final sections of the URL.) Note whether the file tells you what its own sources are, and check that they are acceptable in terms of your course. Then scan the material the way you would for journal articles, using abstracts and headings in the material, and experimenting with your own search terms. (For more advice on evaluating such sources, see the online file [Research Using the Internet.](#))

Write down **complete bibliographical information** for each source consulted, making a master list as you go (preferably in a computer file). For notetaking, keep separate cards, pages, or files on specific points so you can arrange them as needed. Use a subject heading for each note. **Summarize** ideas in your own words (only occasionally paraphrasing or copying down quotations), and leave space for your own comments. (For further guidance, see the file [Taking Notes from Research Reading.](#))

Further Guidance on Reading

U of T libraries stock many books that give advice on different types of reading, including the classic on literary reading by Adler, *How to Read a Book*, and others focussing on academic literacy such as McWhorter, *Academic Reading*, and Giltrow, *Academic Writing*. General books on study skills often include sections on reading strategies: e.g., Pauk, *How to Study in College*; Fleet, *Study for Success*.

Besides the files linked above, here are some other websites that give easily accessible advice:

University of Toronto Academic Success Centre, *Reading and Note-Taking: Textbooks*

www.asc.utoronto.ca/Publications/Reading-and-Note-taking.htm

York University Counselling and Development Centre, *Reading Skills for University*

www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/skillbuilding/reading.html

University of Guelph, *Learning from Textbooks*:

www.lib.uoguelph.ca/assistance/learning_services/fastfacts/learning_from_texts.cfm

University of Texas at Austin, *Brief Suggestions for Increasing Speed and Effectiveness of Reading*:

www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/learning_resources/speed_reading/

University of Toronto Biology 150, *Tips for Success*:

www.cquest.utoronto.ca/zoo/bio150y/tips.htm

University of Toronto Psychology 100, *Hints for Note-Taking, Reading and Studying in PSY 100*:

www.psych.utoronto.ca/users/psy100/Handbookw2004/17studyhints.htm