

Effective reading

Reading for comprehension

You have so much reading to do at University. Is a speed-reading course the answer?

Commercial speed-reading courses tend to focus on making you move your eyes more quickly over the page. But such training takes time and practice, and does not necessarily make you think more quickly or improve your comprehension.

Tertiary level reading is complex and demanding, so it's essential to develop reading strategies like those listed below to enable you to read efficiently and effectively.

1. Understand your purpose for reading

How you read depends largely on **what** you are reading and **why**.

Are you reading:

- an academic paper (article)?
- a technical report?
- a novel?
- a newspaper article?

Are you:

- preparing for a lecture or a tutorial?
- researching an assignment or essay?
- preparing for an exam?

Do you need to:

- gain an overview of a topic?
- find specific information?
- understand the argument or main focus of the text?
- understand the material in depth?
- evaluate the material?

These different purposes and kinds of texts will determine how you read.



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2. Have a focus

You are likely to read more efficiently if you have **specific questions** in mind before you begin to read. Writing them down in your notebook before you start reading will focus your mind, and give you something to refer back to if you get distracted.

Your tutorial and lecture guides may indicate questions and critical issues to focus on. If you are reading for an essay, brainstorming the essay topic with your friends should give you some questions to help you focus.

3. Pre-read the text

Pre-reading gives you an overview of the material and makes you aware of the structure and organization of the text. It can make comprehension easier as you gain an understanding of the author's argument or focus. It also helps you identify which information is relevant to your purpose and therefore what to read in detail.

How?

For an article:

- Note the author, title and date
- Skim through the article, looking at:
 - headings and subheadings
 - diagrams/graphs/charts/illustrations and their captions
 - endnotes, appendices, list of references
- Read the abstract if there is one
- Read the introductory paragraph(s)
- Read the conclusion
- Skim through, reading the first sentence in each paragraph, which is often the topic sentence, containing the main point of the paragraph

For a book:

- Check the table of contents or index for relevant sections or pages
- Skim through the book, looking at
 - chapter headings and subheadings
 - diagrams/graphs/charts/illustrations and their captions
 - endnotes, appendices, list of references
- Skim the introductory chapter for relevant information
- Choose a section you want to read, and pre-read it as described above

Once you have previewed your material, you will have a sense of how it is structured, what is being covered in the text, and which sections you need to read in detail.

4. Understanding complex texts

A text may be difficult to read because it:

- has a structure and organisation that are unfamiliar to you
- uses unfamiliar technical vocabulary
- uses an abstract and impersonal style – things, ideas and relationships, not people and events
- uses a compressed style: *a computerised weather simulation project* instead of *a project using computers to simulate weather patterns*
- deals with concepts and ideas that are new to you
- assumes the reader has background knowledge which you may not yet have
- goes into more detail than you are ready to absorb
- is badly written
- has a combination of any or all of these

5. Suggestions to improve comprehension

Plan your reading in advance: work out exactly **what** you need to read, and **when** you are going to do it.

Don't try to do too much complex reading at one time.

Be selective

Once you have previewed a text, see if there are sections of it that you don't need to read, or that you can leave until later. For example, research papers in the physical and social sciences often use the following structure (often, but not always, indicated by headings):

1. Introduction
2. Literature review (summary and discussion of previous research in the area)
3. Methodology (how, where and with whom the research was carried out)
4. Results (may be in statistical form)
5. Discussion (interpretation of the results related to current knowledge and theory)
6. Conclusion

You might start by reading sections 1, 5 and 6 first, to get an overall idea of the work; then go back to 2 to get information on the background to the research; then read 3 and 4 and re-read 5, to evaluate the methods used and the logic of the conclusions arrived at.

However, having an overall idea of the work, you might decide that 1, 5 and 6 are sufficient for your present purposes, and leave further reading to another time.

Note-taking

You can improve your comprehension and your retention of the material by making **notes**, making an **outline**, or drawing **diagrams** of the material as you read. See the LLSU flyer on **Taking notes from texts**.

Vocabulary

It is important when embarking on a new course or subject that you take careful note of the **vocabulary** central to the discipline. During pre-reading, look for frequently used but unfamiliar words and expressions, make a note of them and look up their meaning before you re-read the text. The index of a book can often help you find definitions for the specialist terms it uses; or you may need a specialist subject dictionary. Develop your own system to record these meanings and the context in which they appear.

Going beyond the prescribed reading

If the theoretical perspectives or key concepts on which the material is based are unfamiliar, you may need to explore some of the **references** that the writer(s) cites in the text and at the end of the paper/book, or go back to a more basic textbook which explains them.

Collaboration

Work with a friend in reading and taking notes. This gives you a chance to discuss any questions you have or difficulties you may come across.

If you are still unclear about important key terms or concepts, **consult your tutor or lecturer**. If the reading is for a tutorial, make sure you raise your questions in the tutorial – that's what the tutorial is for. Other students may be having problems with it too, and discussion and the tutor's input should help clarify the information.

In conclusion

Comprehension of difficult material always takes time. However, being immersed in the subject matter through reading, listening in lectures and discussing in tutorials will increase your familiarity with new terms and concepts. This means that your comprehension will improve. Don't get too anxious if at the start of semester you only understand 60% of what you are reading.

Comprehending a text accurately is the first step of the reading process at tertiary level. The next step is to critically **evaluate** what you read. See the LLSU flyer on **Critical reading** for more information on this.

Reference:

Marshall, L., & Rowland, F. (1998). *A guide to learning independently* (3rd ed.), Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.