Getting the most from your reading

# Introduction

In this guide, we explore practical strategies you can use for academic reading, enabling you to locate the most appropriate material for your needs and approach your reading systematically. We will also demonstrate a technique for boosting your reading comprehension and for working out areas to focus on in future reading.

# Identifying your reading

When studying at university, you're expected to read different types of sources and the amount you're expected to read will differ depending on your subject. Each subject has its own requirements and the content of sources can vary widely. However, there are universal skills and approaches that will help you stay on top of your reading and get the most out of it.

## Knowing how much to read

In some cases, you might be asked to include a specific number of sources in your work. However, most often there won't be a minimum number. Instead your focus should be on the quality of the sources rather than the quantity.

It's better to use fewer sources but engage with those sources effectively than to have more sources but include ones that are less relevant or handle the sources without critical awareness.

Rather than trying to read a specific number of sources, focus on increasing your understanding on the topic.

**Do you feel you've read enough to be able to answer the question?**

Having the confidence to decide that you've read enough and can start writing can be challenging. As you write and discover that you need more information on a particular topic, remember that further reading is a normal part of the research process.

It’s good to begin writing as soon as you can, as this helps you to spot any gaps in your knowledge and to start formulating and developing your ideas. Starting to write early also helps you avoid having to rush your writing after spending too much time reading. To move from reading to writing sooner, try to limit your reading to sources that are most relevant to your course work.

### Active reading

Reading for pleasure generally involves passively taking in a story, whereas academic reading demands active engagement with the text. Academic reading is also purposeful and requires you to make notes, which you will use in various ways to demonstrate your learning. This active engagement is one of the reasons academic reading takes longer to do. The key to reading efficiently is developing a strategy for directing your focus and selecting your sources and approach. This will help you make the best use of your time. To learn more about note making, take a look at our online guides and workshops which can be found in the further support section of this guide.

## Knowing what to read

During your studies, you may be expected to complete assigned reading each week in advance of any lectures, seminars, or tutorials. Set readings will usually be shared with you through a [reading list](https://www.readinglists.manchester.ac.uk/leganto/readinglist/searchlists?auth=CAS) found in your module handbook. Your reading list will usually outline required and further reading and may be organised by when you are expected to complete it. If you are unsure of where to find your required reading, get in touch with your seminar tutor or the module lead and they will be able to help you.

Do your best to stick to your deadlines when it comes to the required reading for your module. If you do not have defined timelines for reading items, set yourself a realistic target to stay on track. You should allow time to include some of the further reading where possible, as this will deepen your understanding of the topic. You are not expected to read all of the further reading suggestions. Instead, these lists are included to provide further sources for each topic in case you would like to read more about them. These lists of further reading suggestions are great starting points for planning your reading for assignments.

### Keeping on top of your reading

Sometimes, it isn’t possible to complete all the reading you've been set for a particular week, but it's always better to do some rather than none. Your tutors will appreciate you reading as much as you can and it will help you be more prepared for seminars or lectures having done some of the reading rather than none of it.

If you're struggling to fit in all your reading, you could start with reading the introduction and conclusion of each or prioritise certain readings over others. You may also want to look at your schedule to see if you're giving yourself enough time to complete the reading. However, if you're having difficulty keeping up with your reading, please reach out to your academic advisor or the Library for help.

### Targeting your reading

When studying a particular source, such as a key text in your subject area, you may be required to read the whole source. If you're reading to research for an assignment, you won’t necessarily have to read each source that you come across in full. For any sources you think might be relevant, a good tip is to start by reading the introduction and the conclusion. You can also make use of the contents page and index to see which chapters or sections will be most relevant to your research.

If you're looking at an online source, make use of the search function to see if and where the topics in which you're interested are covered. You might do these scoping activities and realise the source doesn’t actually relate much to your research. If this is the case, move on to the next source! Sometimes, you might find a source that is really relevant and end up reading the whole thing, but you won’t end up reading the entirety of every source you come across.

## Selecting your sources

When selecting sources for your assignments, you should be primarily looking for quality academic sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters, which you can access using the [Library subject guides](https://subjects.library.manchester.ac.uk/). The types of sources you're looking for will differ depending on your subject: different disciplines will focus on reports, policy documents, statistics, archival material, or works of literature, like novels and poetry. This doesn't mean you should only engage with sources deemed to be ‘academic’: non-academic sources like newspaper articles, blog posts, or even podcasts can be useful to engage with, if relevant. It's essential to engage critically with any source you're reading, making sure not to accept its content as fact without interrogating it first.

Consider the type of source you're using, its relationship to the topic you're researching, and the specific points you're interested in. The following questions will help you to decide whether the source is worth reading in full:

* How does the source and its arguments relate to your topic or research question?
* Does it support the argument you would like to make, or does it challenge it?
* How does it connect to other sources that you have read?

You might find that while the source discusses a key subject area, it doesn't actually relate to the argument you're making. The source may cover quite a broad subject area and only briefly mention ideas that are relevant for your work. Where a source is less relevant to your argument, you may still include it as background information to support your analysis.

### The Selection Process

As mentioned above, a helpful starting point for selecting sources is to look through the reading list, paying attention in particular to suggested further reading. The items on your reading list will have been selected for a reason; they will often be significant and foundational works on the topic. These sources will provide you with a great base level of knowledge and outline the key ideas and debates. For additional reading suggestions, it can be helpful to visit your seminar or module leader during their office hours to ask for their advice: as experts in the field, they can suggest specific articles, books, or journals they think would be relevant to your research.

You can also find sources by using the reference list or bibliography of core sources. For sources that you already know are relevant to your topic, looking at their footnotes and bibliography can show you which other sources they're engaging with. Using reference lists as sources of further reading will lead you to an abundance of relevant sources, while also highlighting key debates between scholars that you can reflect on in your work to demonstrate your criticality and understanding of the field.

Searching is another important aspect of finding relevant sources. Using [Library Search](https://www.librarysearch.manchester.ac.uk/discovery/search?vid=44MAN_INST:MU_NUI) and [subject-specific databases](https://subjects.library.manchester.ac.uk/) are a great way to find sources, while thinking about the search tools and terms you're using will make searching more efficient and help you to find more relevant results. Take a look at our guide on [Library Support for Searching](https://www.education.library.manchester.ac.uk/mle/packages/searching/) to learn more. To discover how to find the most relevant and high-quality sources, check out this guide to [using academic databases](https://www.education.library.manchester.ac.uk/mle/introducing-databases/).

# Managing your reading

### Making reading a habit

The best way to develop a new habit is to start small and incorporate the habit into your existing routine. Start by identifying a point in your existing routine where you could tag on a short burst of reading. Do you often take a coffee break in the morning/afternoon? If so, could you read a short article/one section of a source whilst enjoying your coffee?

Once you have allocated time to read, you want to maximise your ability to focus. To understand complex ideas in the material you're reading and to keep reading for longer periods, you'll need to avoid distractions.

Try to identify the environment that works best for you, as well as common factors that could distract you:

Do you focus best in the Library or at home?

Do you need to find a quiet space or do you prefer background noise, like in a café?

Do you need a comfy chair to sit in, or maybe to settle down with a hot drink or a snack?

Do you need your phone to look up unfamiliar terminology or will it distract you?

Exploring what works best for you to get into the right mental state for reading can mean you're less likely to be distracted by external factors like noise and notifications or internal factors such as discomfort, hunger, and thirst.

### Reflective activity

Describe your usual working environment below, including what items you usually have with you when you work, the level of background noise, and the time of day. Could you change one thing to help you focus for longer? What could you try to do differently if your usual working environment isn't working for you? Write down your response below.

## Staying focussed

### The Pomodoro Method

You could also use a structured time management technique like the [Pomodoro method](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12593) to manage your reading. The Pomodoro technique involves undertaking tasks in focussed bursts where all distractions are restricted, interspersed with regular short breaks of around five minutes. These planned breaks can help to increase motivation, while banning all distractions can ensure you use your allocated working time effectively.

### Target your reading

Feeling overwhelmed by unrealistic goals or poorly-defined tasks can trigger procrastination. For example, starting out with the aim to “read everything on the course's list of further reading” is likely to leave you feeling demoralized and exhausted from the outset, making distractions more appealing. Reading in an academic context will take much longer than reading for pleasure, and you may need to re-read material if you are analysing it in depth. It's therefore crucial to target your reading, identifying the best quality and most relevant sources to read in detail, rather than trying to read an unmanageable amount.

## Reviewing prior knowledge to help focus

A key step towards reading more efficiently is to identify the purpose of your reading. There are a number of different factors to consider that will affect your focus and purpose when reading.

Each individual brings a unique perspective to their reading, based on their prior knowledge and experience. You might read an article and make notes about it, then return to it later with more knowledge and view it with a different perspective. Your existing knowledge on a topic is your starting point; the level of knowledge and understanding you need is your end point. Your focus for reading is to obtain the information that exists in the gap between your starting point and desired end point.

# Reading for understanding

The context in which you're reading will affect your purpose or goal. Your specific academic context should inform what you look for in your reading. Sometimes you'll be reading with the purpose of making notes for revision and recall, other times you'll be reading to develop your understanding or to synthesise information across a variety of different sources.

In this section we take you through a method to help you develop your active reading skills and get the most out of each source. As we discussed in 'Managing your reading', you want to engage actively with your sources to ensure you understand key ideas and to identify further research to undertake.

## The SQW3R method

The SQW3R method is a structured approach to reading that can help you identify the most relevant content to engage with and check you've achieved what you set out to.

SQW3R is a variation on the SQ3R method that includes writing as a key component of effective reading. Including writing as part of the reading process directs you to read in a way that supports your understanding of the material and prepares you for using your reading in assignments.

Each letter of SQW3R represents a step in this active reading process (with three Rs). The letters stand for:

1. Survey
2. Question or Query
3. Read and Write
4. Recite or Recall
5. Review

Following this process from start to finish will enable you to target your reading effectively, make useful notes, check your grasp of the content, test you remember what you've learnt, and identify where you can improve for the future.

### Survey

As discussed in 'Identifying your reading', [reading lists](https://www.readinglists.manchester.ac.uk/leganto/readinglist/searchlists?auth=CAS&continue), [subject guides](https://subjects.library.manchester.ac.uk/), and [Library Search](https://www.librarysearch.manchester.ac.uk/discovery/search?vid=44MAN_INST:MU_NUI) will provide a wealth of materials you can use for your assessments. It's vital that you identify the most appropriate pieces of writing to read, so you don't waste time reading material in too much depth or reading parts of a text that aren't relevant to your reading goals. By quickly working out the general idea of the reading, you can decide if you need to devote time to reading the whole thing or focus on just a specific section or chapter.

To assess if the text needs deeper engagement, ask yourself: is the content relevant? What about the topic does it help you understand? Also consider whether you're ready to read the text. If you're struggling to understand the content, are there guides or introductions to reading the text that it might be better to read first?

You can skim-read a text to get a sense of what the text is about, in order to support your understanding of its main arguments and the topics it covers. You can apply this to set reading you have to complete for your studies, so that even if you aren't able to complete all the reading for that week in time for your classes, you have a sense of the overall structure and general ideas the reading covers for when you return to read it in more depth.

By surveying or skim-reading, we don't just mean quickly flipping through the pages of a book or just looking at the words as fast as you can! Instead, you'll want to make use of the ways the text is already divided up into sections with headings, as well as systems like indexes, reference lists, and search functions (for online materials) that help you check for keywords in the text. You can use highlighting and sticky-notes to remind yourself which sections were the most relevant.

You might start with the **table of contents** in a book, or the **section headings** in an article. Scientific reports or articles often include an **introduction**, **methodology**, **results**, and **discussion** section, so you might focus on just the results section. Sometimes the author of the text will emphasise important terms or sections using **italics**, **bold**,or **highlighting.** They may also put **boxes** around important text. You can also pay attention to any **images or diagrams** and their **captions**, as they sometimes summarize key ideas at a glance.

Looking at these elements in your reading can help you see how a text relates to the topic of the module and other reading you've done already, or to gauge if the information in the text is relevant to your assignment question. Sometimes these clues in the text will indicate that the work can give you a broad overview of a key topic; sometimes it might indicate where to focus your reading. In any case, surveying your reading will help you save energy and time so you can read more effectively.

### Question

Once you've surveyed your reading, identifying texts or sections of text to focus on, you can think about the questions you want to answer with your reading, as well as general questions you can ask yourself to help deepen your understanding. If you're reading a physical version of the text, you might want to write your questions in the margins (but not in Library books of course!) or using sticky notes. If you prefer to read a digital version of the text, you can use annotation software to highlight parts of the text and add your questions in notes or comment boxes. You can highlight and add notes in [Kortext eTextbooks](https://support.kortext.com/s/article/How-can-I-highlight-sections-of-texts-or-make-notes) or use a PDF annotation tool like the [Comment tool in Adobe Acrobat](https://www.adobe.com/uk/acrobat/how-to/annotate-pdf-online.html).

You can start with questions that arise from the survey stage of this reading method. While you're skimming the text, make sure to note down any questions that you have, including any vocabulary you're unfamiliar with. In order to draw connections between texts and synthesise ideas, ask how the reading relates to previous learning and other reading you've undertaken.

You can turn titles, headings, and subheadings into questions that you'll try to answer when you read the text more closely. These questions will help you check your understanding. So if the heading of a chapter is "Mixed methods research," you could turn this into the question "What are the defining characteristics of mixed methods research?" This gives you a clear focus for reading the chapter, and a way of evaluating whether you have the information or understanding you need after reading it. When engaging with any illustrations or images in the text, ask yourself: Why have they been included? What do they add to my understanding of the material?

Here are some more suggestions of questions you might ask:

* What is the reasoning or logic underpinning the claims the author is making?
* Why has the author used these examples to support their point?
* What position or perspective is the author bringing to the text? Do they have an explicit ideological position?

Using these questions and developing your own will help to focus your reading and ensure that you're engaging actively with the text to try to find the answers. You can also start thinking of other strategies to find solutions when the text doesn't have the answers you need.

### Read and Write

Now that you know where you are directing your attention and the questions you want to answer, you can start reading the work more closely. This stage of the method requires focus. You'll want to avoid any distractions and to set aside more time than you expect so that you can read carefully and think through any challenging ideas.

As you read, you should write down notes, but make sure that you are making notes in your own words rather than copying the exact wording. This will both deepen your understanding of what you're reading and ensure you don't run into problems with plagiarism.

Here are some strategies you can try when reading and writing notes:

**Answering your questions**

**Read:** Keep referring to the questions you asked in the previous stage to think about how your reading does or doesn't answer those questions.

**Write:** Where you can, note down your answers to your questions. If you're reading in preparation for lectures or seminars, you'll want to keep a note of any unanswered questions to bring to class discussions.

**Focussing on a section**

**Read:** If you identified a specific section of the text as being important, give yourself more time to read that section in more depth.

**Write:** Take more time to write more detailed notes on this section as well, discussing how it relates to the text as a whole and what it adds to your understanding of the topic.

**Understanding key points**

**Read:** Try to identify the main idea in each paragraph of the text: this is often near the start of the paragraph, before the author provides examples or evidence to support it.

**Write:** Create your own [reverse outline](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/reverse_outlining.html) of the text by summarising the key point made in each paragraph in a list. This can help you understand the overall structure of the work and the direction of the argument, while also helping you to spot any gaps or flaws in reasoning that you might want to critically analyse.

**Repeating your reading**

**Read:** To get a more thorough grasp of complex ideas or to pay attention to details in the text, re-read a key section. You may want to re-read the section more slowly this time.

**Write:** Make a note of what you notice the second time around. If an idea is still confusing to you, can you work out why that is?

### Recall

This stage of the reading process tests your understanding and memory of key details of the material. Follow these steps:

1. Put the material you've been reading out of sight: you might want to close the book you've been reading or the tab on your browser. Put aside any notes you've made as well.
2. On a fresh piece of paper or in a new Word document, write down everything you can remember about what you've read. You might want to group this into the major themes, concepts, arguments, and examples used in the work.
3. Now return to the notes you made on the reading to check what you missed - did you forget anything crucial? Did you misremember the meaning of a concept or misconstrue the argument?
4. Go back to the material you were reading and re-read any relevant sections to refresh your memory and deepen your understanding.

**🔊 Tip:** Reading key sections from the material out loud can help you to remember it and to rephrase it in your own words.

### Review

The final stage of the reading process involves reviewing your questions, your notes, and your ability to remember the information. This is also the point at which you should reflect on any further reading you may need to do, either to understand what you've read more fully or to find more relevant information for your research.

Reflecting on what you've read and written so far, you should also try to work out what your own position is: Given what you already know, do you agree with the claims the author makes? Or is there anything you'd need to know more about in order to decide? Has your position changed, even slightly, as a result of reading this material?

You can also reflect on any perspectives or ideas you think are missing from the reading that you'd like to add or think about further. What connections can you make to the other material you've read? What do you think you need to read next?

**📌 Tip:** Concept mapping can be a useful activity to visualise the article. Take a look at this blog post by [The Learning Scientists](https://www.learningscientists.org/blog/2020/11/19-1) to learn more about concept mapping and how to use it to develop your ideas.

# Summary

In this online guide we have introduced a process and various tools you can use to help you identify the most relevant sources to read. We have explored how understanding your purpose and contextualising with prior knowledge can help you focus your reading. Finally, we have practiced methods (such as SQW3R) to help you engage actively with your reading and get the most out of it.  All of these skills will help you to read more effectively and efficiently.