Focus on Reading Strategies

Difficult text
Don’t be put off by difficult text, learn how to deal with it. Inevitably, as a student, you are going to read difficult text. Here you need to read carefully and thoughtfully. Read small amounts of text at a time. Depending on the difficulty of the text, your reading speed could vary from 200 down to as few as 40 words per minute. Pause, think and try to absorb what you have read.

Re-read
Re-read the text you have found difficult, you may find it easier to look at it again the next day. The more familiar it becomes to you the less difficult it appears to be. Check you understand what you have read. Look up the meaning of the words you don’t understand.

Key sentences
These sentences sum up the content of the paragraph and they can occur anywhere within it. Finding the key sentence helps you focus your understanding of what you read and makes you think about what is important.

Make the text your own
Either own the textbook or photocopy* any difficult passages, chapters etc. You are now able to highlight the text, make notes and underline as you wish.

Understand the terminology
Make a list of any words you don’t understand. Use a good dictionary e.g. Oxford Concise English Dictionary (1999 10th ed.). Also, use the specialist dictionary which relates to your subject. If you get stuck, look ahead and look back in the text for clues. Look for help in other textbooks and lecture notes. Ask the lecturer, ask other students.

*photocopy – you must follow the ‘Copyright guidelines for students and staff’ available in the library.
Questioning what you read

Questioning is a technique you need to learn. It helps you to read intelligently.

Never begin reading without some questions in mind. They start to make you focus on exactly what you need. They help to understand the text and stop you wasting time.

Make a list

Write down some questions before you start reading. Here are some general questions to get you started:

- What is the book about? An obvious but good question to ask yourself. Can you answer it before starting to read the book?
- When was it written? Is it up to date? You have to question the value of reading a book that is not up to date because you could waste a lot of time here. Out of date information can be useless.
- Does it have information you require? Before reading the book, you need to know the answer to this question. It can save you time.
- What is the line of argument? Is it relevant to your needs? By speed reading, can you identify what approach the author is taking: for example, is it general or very specific?
- What is the style and layout of the book? Is it straightforward or difficult? For example, some authors summarise key issues and then go on to develop them throughout the chapter. Once you understand the approach the author has taken, you can start to work out how much time you need to put aside to read.

You should not believe every word you read

Remember, authors have their own point of view. Question it! The more specialist textbooks you read, the more points of view you will discover.

Distinguish evidence from opinion

Question the opinion and identify the evidence and question how you can use both.

Become an active reader

If you take time to question what you are reading, you are actively participating in the reading process. This is one of the most important reading skills you can develop. An active reader always reads with pen in hand, ready to write down questions as they occur.
Selecting the right textbook
Choosing the right textbook can save you a lot of time and money.

Evaluate the text
- Who is the author? Does this indicate a certain bias?
- Is it at the right level?
- Is the publication up to date? Are you using the latest edition?
- Does it contain the information you require?

The book list
Booklists can seem terrifying. Be reassured, you are not expected to read everything. But you do need to develop a strategy for making an intelligent choice of books. Read the list carefully to see if any books are considered essential reading. If this is not obvious, ask your lecturer, consult lecture notes and scrutinise assignment details. Then you can prioritise your reading list. As you become more familiar with your subject area (books, references etc.) this will become easier.

Buying a textbook
Make sure you look at other textbooks before choosing the one which you are going to buy. Then ask yourself how are you going to use it. If you’re going to use it frequently, it’s worth buying. To improve your reading, you really need to own the necessary books for your study. Talk to your lecturers and find out which are the best books for you.

In the library
When you are in your area of study in the library, there are some questions you should ask yourself to help choose a textbook. Are there a lot of copies of one particular textbook, for instance? If there are, it means that the library recognises that there is great demand for this text. Could it be useful to you? Look also at the condition of the book. If it seems to be brand new, has it just been published or is it unused? Well used books are a good indicator of a useful text.

Is it appropriate for you?
Does the book look readable and manageable? Are you comfortable with the level of language and vocabulary? If you are unsure about choosing between a number of similar texts, then these can be useful and valid questions to ask yourself.
Speed Reading

Speed reading is a skill you need to develop. It helps you to read more quickly

You can develop the skill of speed reading

Generally, reading is the eye fixing on each word in a sentence in turn. To speed up your reading you should try to use fewer fixations*. After practice, you will start to fix on the significant words only. You’ll spend less time reading but your understanding will be just as good.

Speed reading averages between 350 and 400 words per minute.

Speed reading should be used for short periods only. Remember, you can pause for thought.

When is speed reading appropriate?

Speed reading can save you time when doing background reading and researching relevant texts.

How to improve

• build up your vocabulary
• try fewer fixations*
• Try to read a broadsheet newspaper every day
• be confident, don’t re-read
• make sure you always read in good light and airy conditions

Titles of broadsheet newspapers

• The Times
• The Independent
• The Guardian
• Financial Times
• The Daily Telegraph

*fixation – a technical term for the process

The set textbook

This is a key text. You need to know how to deal with it. Once you have the textbook in your possession, look through it from cover to cover and become familiar with its structure. Typical textbooks have these sorts of structures:
You need to get to grips with the text as quickly as possible and the above structures can help you to do this.

**Contents and Index**

The Contents page and the Index are usually positioned as above. These pages are very useful because you can track down what you want from the book very quickly. Speed read both initially to identify relevant information. Once you have found what you want, focus on it and start to read more carefully.

**Chapter headings**

The Chapter headings provide a more structured way of finding what you want. Take time to read through all of them carefully. These enable you to focus on your area of immediate study; the core of your assignment needs. Once you have established this core, you can then start to think in terms of Further Reading.

**Further reading**

The Further Reading page/s of the textbook are just that – suggested titles of other textbooks, journals etc, that can broaden your knowledge on the subject. They allow you to extend your reading more selectively once you have identified the core of your approach. The Bibliography/References identify other related texts and can save you unnecessary time in the library.

**Notes**

Notes usually mean the references made in the chapters like this: vocabulary* (see bottom of page). Appendix/Appendices will be referred to at certain points in the text. Here you will find an extra body of knowledge, usually explanatory or documentary.

*vocabulary – improve your vocabulary, note any unfamiliar words as you read through the text and look them up later.
Vocabulary
Improving and extending your vocabulary will help you to read more effectively. Likewise, the more you read, the wider your vocabulary will become.

Most people manage quite well using a vocabulary of about 3000 words on a daily basis. However, most textbooks use vocabulary that does not often appear in everyday speech and, on top of that, each subject area has its own specialist language. This is why you, as a student, need to develop strategies to extend your vocabulary.

Read widely
Read as much as possible and try to vary the types of text you read. As well as textbooks, you could read novels, journals, magazines, newspapers (see those listed below):

Newspapers
- The Times; The Independent; The Guardian; Financial Times; The Daily Telegraph

Magazines:
- New Statesman & Society; The Economist; Spectator

Make a personal vocabulary
As you read, make a note of all the interesting words that you come across. Use a dictionary to understand their meaning and start using them in your own writing and in conversation. Gradually, they will become part of your active vocabulary. By continuing to add new words, you will improve your vocabulary.

Make a field-specific vocabulary
Read textbooks and listen to lecturers in order to identify some of the key words that are frequently used in your field. You must ensure that you understand their meaning by looking in a good specialist dictionary. Again, use these words in your assignments so that they become part of your own vocabulary.

Use a dictionary
You need to use a good dictionary at all times; e.g. Concise Oxford English Dictionary 10th ed. 2002. Find out what dictionary/thesaurus software is available for your computer.

Latin and Greek roots
You can improve your understanding of words by looking for patterns. Many words are of Latin or Greek origin, for example:

> aqua (Latin) means ‘water’ = aqueduct, aquarium,

> graph (Greek) means ‘to write or record’ = photography, autograph, biography