When you are new to university study, the amount of reading you are expected to do can be daunting. However, you can learn how to prepare yourself in advance and find ways to make the going easier. What appears to be an impossible task (tackling all that text) becomes possible when you start becoming an active reader; that is, asking questions about what you need to find out, taking a strategic and critical approach, and then selecting readings that relate to your questions and tasks.

Does uni study involve lots of reading?

In a word - yes. Most courses involve a great deal of reading, which is why you need to learn new techniques to manage the workload.

What will I be expected to read for?

- Lectures: You will be expected to do some pre-reading in order to prepare for lectures
- Tutorials: Tutorials are often based on assigned readings. If you have not read the material, you won’t be able to participate in group discussions.
- Assignments: You can’t write your assignment until you have done the necessary research.

The aim of most of your reading will be to seek information related to an assignment or course material.

I read novels and newspapers - will reading uni material be the same?

How we read usually depends on our purpose for reading. For example, while you might start reading a novel on page one and read every word until you reach the end, this wouldn't be an effective approach to take with academic reading. To get the most out of academic reading and to use your time effectively, you need to take a strategic approach.

I have a reading list - am I expected to read everything on it?

Lengthy reading lists for courses and essays can be confusing, particularly when the subjects are unfamiliar. However you don’t have to feel lost. Although only rarely will you be expected to read absolutely everything, if the thought of all that reading is daunting, don’t hesitate to take a strategic approach and be selective.

Tips for active reading

Reading at university = reading with a purpose

Successful study at uni is often about meeting competing demands and deadlines, so you need to get the most out of your reading in the limited time available. Before you begin, make sure you have identified a) the purpose for doing the reading and b) what you need to achieve.

Always read with a purpose in mind. Before you begin, you should have an idea of why you are reading and what you are looking for/ what you want to achieve. Are you reading:

- to locate specific information?
- to understand difficult ideas?
- to gain an overview of something?
to enjoy words and descriptions (as in poetry and some prose)?
to relax and escape into a novel?

Think about the way you would read to get a broad idea of what an article might be about, compared to how you would read to understand a complex and detailed concept - you might use previewing for the first task and intensive or critical reading for the second (more about this in the Reading Strategies section).

Working out why you are reading something (what you need to achieve) will determine the way you will read it (or which reading strategies to use).

Be selective about what you read

Uni study requires a lot of reading within a limited time, so it is important to be selective about what you read. You need to make decisions about what is essential.

- Establish which readings are required for your particular course and which are suggested (not compulsory). In some courses required readings take the form of a Course ‘Reader’ or textbook, in others your lecturer/tutor will indicate what is essential.
- There will be times when you need to read an entire article or chapter in detail. At other times you may be looking for specific information relating to an assignment topic and only a couple of pages or even a couple of paragraphs in a text will be useful. Once you locate the parts of a text that are going to be most relevant you may not need to read the rest.

How to select?

- Know what you are looking for (i.e. have a purpose)
- Identify key words to help you search
- Look for these key words when browsing the table of contents and index of a book for relevant pages
- Obtain an overview to further narrow down the ‘possibly useful’ field.

Focus on the question/task

- Ask yourself what it is you must find out. Identify questions you want to answer; actively look for those answers and evidence to inform them.
- Identify a few topic key words to look for. Your assignment questions usually have these.
- If you are reading for a specific assignment, read with a copy of the question/task on hand so you don’t waste time reading irrelevant material.

Before you read, establish what you already know

Any prior knowledge of a topic you are reading about, and linking new material with your past experience will help you read more effectively.

- Ask yourself what you already know or think about this topic (from lectures, from other reading, from what you have heard or seen).
- If you have a reading list, select a source that might offer a good starting point. If the topic or material is new, begin with a general introductory text and read slowly.
- Read any related questions to the reading before doing the reading; they may be questions at the back of the chapter or the essay/assignment question.
- Identify your expectations - what do you think it will be about?
- Ask yourself questions about the topic. Change the title, headings and subheadings into questions or ask yourself what you want to find out.

You will remember more if you read with questions in your mind, rather than adopting the ‘sponge’ approach - simply trying to absorb everything.

Break reading into manageable segments
If you are finding reading overwhelming, break the reading up into manageable segments (e.g. chapters, individual articles, a specific number of pages).

- Identify your purpose and the time you have available
- Set yourself a goal (for example, decide to read for a set length of time or a certain number of pages).
- Reward yourself with a break when you’ve completed it.
- The tasks and goals may be large or small, depending on what needs to be achieved.

Keep track of what you read

Always note where information and ideas come from. Record details of author, title, place of publication, publisher and date so that you can find the text again if necessary. Always record page numbers with any notes you take.

- See Notemaking from written texts

See next: Reading strategies