Reading, researching and note-making
Finding what you need

• reading lists are the starting point
• books and electronic sources
• use the best search facilities for academic sources—**not** Google: **Onesearch**, library e-resources and databases
• subject librarian
• don’t over-rely on secondary sources such as textbooks
Active reading

How you engage with the text depends on your purpose for reading
Before you start reading

What is my purpose for reading?

What do I want to get out of this text?

What are my questions?
Before you start to take any notes or read closely....

........get an overview of the whole text
Scrutinise:
• the title
• the authors’ credentials
• the time and place of publication
Try to get a sense of who it was it written for and why
Is it a mainly theoretical or an empirical paper?
Take a look at the reference list – who are the ‘grandparents’ of the article? Can you locate it in a particular discipline, field or school of thought?
‘Shake hands’ with the text

• title, headings and subheadings
  (use the contents pages as well)
• read carefully the abstract, and any summaries or overviews
• read the introduction and conclusion
• look for signposting and other structural cues
Make sure you have identified from these parts of the text the main message, or key message, or unique contribution of the piece
Start questioning before you read

Raise questions; look for possible connections with what you have already read; think about how this would apply to other contexts maybe including ‘real life’…………………

Think about what you want to find out from the writer........ Or where you may want to challenge them....
Decision time

Now decide

• which the aspects or parts of the text do you really need to focus on?
• what type of notes would suit your purpose best?
Now start reading! actively.....

**read with a purpose**
- focus on the important sections for your purpose
- use your own or set questions to establish a focus

**read for meaning**
- identify **topic sentences** in paragraphs
- summarise **key points** in paragraphs and longer sections
- identify **analysis and arguments** rather than ‘facts’ or ‘information’
  – look for words which **signal argument**: *therefore, since, thus*
  – try paraphrasing key claims and evidence
- have a **conversation** with the text
  – raise your own questions
  – where would you like to challenge the writer?
  – note down your personal response
What if the content is too hard?

Build bridges into the content

• with peer support
• with judicious use of other more accessible texts
What does being ‘critical’ mean?

Taking a critical approach to your reading means looking at texts with an evaluative and challenging attitude.

It means we have to move away from a view of reading which sees a text simply as a way of transferring facts or information.
How do we evaluate academic texts?

- most academic texts set out to argue: to demonstrate an idea or support a claim
- therefore to evaluate them we need to look not simply at the information they contain, but how that material is used to develop the argument or support the claim
Identifying the main argument or claim is central to making a critical response

• If we don’t identify what the piece is arguing we have no measuring stick with which to evaluate it
• We are not just evaluating the information in the text but the way reasoning is used to build up a case
• In other words, does the claim stand up??
Key elements to look for

The writer's
• perspective – where is s/he coming from?
• assumptions – what does the writer take for granted?
• evidence – does the material offered actually support the points raised?
• reasoning – do the points follow on logically from prior points; are the generalisations made justified by the evidence?
Implications for how we read

Criticality will come most sharply into focus when you are reading with a clear

question
issue
puzzle

in mind.
This will direct your

• overall choice of material
• selection of key materials within this range
• your evaluation of the material
• how you use it in your own writing
Note-taking

- linear notes
- mind maps
- spider diagrams
- summaries with evaluative comments
Other ways of engaging with the text

• colour coding
• underlining
• annotating in the margin
• challenging the text: two colours
• coding and symbols on the text
Using web-based material

Process it! Don’t just download it......
downloading articles directly on to your hard-drive
student’s brain is by-passed
Recording your reading

• to avoid the plagiarism trap
• endnote: free bibliographic software
• capture the essential meaning but also your own critical response

Time spent as you read saves panic at submission time!
In summary: reading at post grad level needs to be

Strategic
Active
Critical
What will you try?
Further resources


- *Navigating the Page*: a comprehensive booklet from Southampton University: download from this page [http://www.southampton.ac.uk/uni-life/learning-teaching/skills-guides.page](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/uni-life/learning-teaching/skills-guides.page)