

Academic Reading

Academic reading is a complex, effortful process. Try these approaches to get the most out of it and use it to good effect.

You can spend a lot of time reading and taking notes, but many students end up feeling overwhelmed or that they're not getting a lot out of it. These strategies will help you master the literature.

Set the agenda

Academic writing is persuasive, but just because the text claims to be full of important information, doesn't mean that it's all helpful to you. Decide in advance what you need from a text—a fact, an overview of a topic, an understanding of a debate.

Different strategies

Don't worry about reading 'properly' - academic reading is functional. Skim, scan, skip bits, start in the middle, just as you need to. Whatever works!

Read actively

Re-reading and highlighting won't help you understand the text. Explain it back to yourself in your own terms, whether out loud, in paraphrase or summary, as a diagram, to help the meaning sink in.

Question everything

Critical reading is a key university skill. After each statement, try interrogating it with a question—Why is that? How do you know that? How sure can you be? How does that work? Could there be a different interpretation or explanation? What's missing?

Compare and contrast

The best way to figure out how you respond to a text is to compare it to another one. Do they agree or disagree, and which do you side with? Do they say similar or different things, and why? This helps you develop your own stance.

Make, don't take

Cutting and pasting or copying out sections is very passive, and can lead to more notes than you need or even plagiarism. Talk back to the text by making notes of your response – questions.