



Top tips for academic reading

Academic reading is a skill (or, more precisely, a set of skills) that – like all skills – improves with practice. You may have to read an academic text three, five, or more times before you fully understand it. If academic reading is a challenge for you, try some of these techniques.

SQ3R: This is a well-known and long-established reading comprehension strategy that was originally developed with college students in mind. The steps involved are:

- 1. Survey:** When you first encounter an academic text, start by surveying its headings and sub-headings, any tables and figures, and its summary or concluding paragraphs. Here you just try to get a sense of what the text is about.
- 2. Question:** Formulate some questions about the text. For example: What is the main issue under discussion (the ‘theme’ of the reading)? What is the relevance of this text to my study topic, assignment, or exam? What are the main points covered and what conclusions are reached?
- 3. Read:** With your chosen questions in mind, read the text. Keeping these in mind as you read should make reading more ‘active’ than just reading through the material without a purpose.
- 4. Recall:** Having read the text, try to explain it, out loud, in your own words, as if you were telling a friend or classmate about it (or, actually do this with a classmate). If you prefer, jot down a paragraph or two about what you have read instead, again with your questions in mind.
- 5. Review:** Look back over your questions and consider whether you have answered them. Do you need to read the text again? Do you understand what you have read? If not, repeat steps 3 and 4.

The SQ3R technique encourages active engagement with written texts, rather than passive reading.



Reading and Research Skills

Here are some more tips for active reading:

On your **first reading** of a shorter piece of text (such as a journal article or book chapter), **read it right through in one go** to get a feel for the material. Don't worry about understanding everything or taking notes; just try to get a general gist.

Try using **text-to-speech software** (such as TextHelp Read & Write, installed on all PCs on campus, or AT bar, available online) to listen to a piece of text when you first encounter it. Some students find it easier to get a feel for a text in this way before reading it.

After this first reading (or listening), did you **understand** some, most or all of the text, or was it unintelligible to you? If the latter, consider using a **language-simplifying app** such as Rewordify.

Read (or listen to) the text a second time. This time, when you encounter words or concepts that you don't understand, note them down, and look them up. **Take note of key words, concepts, and arguments.** If the text belongs to you, you may find it useful to **highlight** or underline passages.

Do you have a better understanding second-time around? Can you say what **conclusions** the author (or authors) reached and on what basis – theory, evidence, belief? Do you **agree** with those conclusions?

On subsequent readings, make more detailed notes, **summarising** the text and focusing on **specific points or quotes** that may be of use to you. Don't copy directly from the text unless you plan to quote lines or passages 'word-for-word' in an assignment or exam. Take note of the information that you will need for your **bibliography or list of references** if you're reading for an assignment.

Refine these strategies for longer pieces of text – you will probably need to take notes as you go, as it won't be feasible to read whole books repeatedly.

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