

# Effective reading and note-taking



The sort of reading we are obliged to engage with at university is very different from the sort of reading we might choose at home, such as novels and magazines. When we read academic texts, we are often trying to understand ideas that we have not previously encountered or that are quite complex. Therefore, as well as being able to read, we also need a way of 'engaging with' or 'getting into' the text.

One method for effective reading is SQ3R (Robinson, 1946). Although it may seem rather old-fashioned this method and variations of this method are still used today. The method may also seem a clinical approach to a task which clearly involves thoughts and feelings and it may not always be appropriate. However, it can be applied to any text. SQ3R is short for: Survey, Question, Read, Recall, and Review.

## **Survey**

Spend a minute or two, quickly scanning the text you are going to read in order to gain an overall impression. With a text book you might want to look at the title, date of publication, content's list, summary and or introduction. With a journal article there may be an abstract which summarises the key ideas and the text may be structured using subheadings. This process may prevent you from reading texts which are not relevant or helpful to your studies.

## **Questions**

Write down some questions which you expect to find answers for in the text. While this does not necessarily make texts interesting it does give reading a purpose. Do not be afraid to begin with very simple questions and move on to more complex ones as you read more and begin to understand the subject better. For example, you may begin by asking 'what do x and y mean?' and then go on to ask, 'what is the relationship between x and y' or 'to what extent does x affect y'

## **Read**

Read the text once without making any notes. If the text is particularly long you may wish to break it into sections or stages. Decide beforehand where the section breaks will be. As you read, keep in mind your questions and also keep asking, is the text relevant? Is the author stating facts or opinions and can I make use of this information?

## **Recall**

Most of us forget what we have read within a few minutes. Therefore it helps to stop reading after a while and try to recall the important points of a text. This activity encourages us to concentrate, helps us to remember and allows us to put ideas into our own words.

Note: in an essay you must acknowledge your sources (i.e. use citations and references) even when you are not using direct quotations.

## **Review**

Reviewing is about checking your notes against the text to ensure you have either recalled all the main points or recalled them accurately. It is also an opportunity to see if you can now answer any of the questions which you set yourself at the start and whether any new questions have emerged.

While this approach still requires some effort on your part and it may not always be appropriate or effective, it may encourage you to think more strategically about reading rather than avoiding it altogether or to spend lots of time reading with no obvious benefit.

## NOTE-TAKING

As with reading, effective note-taking is an active process. It is not an active process to copy words from a book onto paper. After all, a young child could probably do that with any text but the result would not be a set of good notes. Active note taking means asking yourself, what or who are the notes for? What is the text about? What are the main ideas?

### Why take notes

You might want to take notes for a variety of reasons; to focus concentration, to aid memory and understanding, to summarise texts for revision, so you can use the ideas in essays or written assignments or perhaps so that somebody else can use them. Recognising that there are different reasons makes it easier to see why there is no single way of making notes.

### Main ideas

Good notes should pick out the 'bones' of an argument or key ideas in a text, especially those which are relevant to your studies. Often the main idea in a single paragraph will be contained in the first or second sentence. The supporting sentences may clarify the idea for you but you probably do not need to record those once you have understood the main idea.

If you find it difficult to find the 'main idea' in a paragraph or series of paragraphs, you could use a procedure based on the following text analysis:

- what is the topic of the paragraph or paragraphs?
- what is special about the topic?

If you can answer these 2 questions you have identified the main idea.

### Signposts

As you read, keep a look out for words and phrases in the text which signal key ideas such as, 'The most important...', 'Essentially...', 'In conclusion...', 'The main point is...' and so on. You may even find it helpful to read an author's conclusion first so you know in advance where an author is leading.

### Style of notes

Broadly speaking there are two styles of notes, linear and diagrammatic. It is perfectly acceptable to adopt one style exclusively, alternate styles, or use different styles at different times. Unless you are making them for someone else, notes are your personal record and as long they are meaningful and useful to you it does not matter what they look like. There may be times when you need lots of detail and others when you just need an outline.

Linear notes are most effective when used with wide margins so comments, questions and ideas can be added subsequently with sub-headings which will give your notes structure. Other annotations such as circles, arrows, underlines and use of colour can help to highlight themes and show the relationship between two ideas. You may also find using abbreviations for common words or words that occur frequently help you to speed up the process.

### Review your approach

If you spend time making notes, then it is important that they serve their purpose. Keep checking that your notes make sense and are useful to you.