

Reading

Reading is an integral part of learning at university, but with so much to read it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. Effective reading strategies and approaches can help all students to be more intentional and efficient readers.

Readings aren't just something to complete and check off your to-do list—they are part of the learning context of each course. There are, broadly speaking, two types of courses at university:

- **traditional:** content is delivered primarily through lectures, with readings and other components as a supplement
- **flipped:** content is delivered primarily through online modules, readings, and pre-recorded lectures; in-class time is devoted to applications, problem sets, case studies, etc.

We recommend that you finish readings for a flipped course before the lecture, with sufficient time to engage with and learn the information prior to in-class examples and applications. When and how you do readings for lecture-based courses might be more flexible, depending on things like your background knowledge and the difficulty of the material, or the professor's expectations.

Set up for reading

Many students report difficulty keeping up with readings, overlooking the fact that they tend to save their readings until 11:00 p.m., are distracted by several open tabs and frequent notifications, or are trying to read while doing something else. Try the following approaches:

- Read in a **quiet place**, such as a library or your desk at home.
- When it's time to read, **turn off your technology**. Put your phone on silent and take it off your desk or table.
- **Try not to multitask**. Don't put a movie on, or listen to music, or work somewhere with a lot of distractions.
- **Don't get too comfortable**. Reading while sitting in your soft, warm bed may not lead to the most productive reading session.
- Be sure you have **good lighting** and an uninterrupted block of time.
- Plan to read **when you will be able to concentrate well**—choose your most focused time of day and plan a realistic amount of time to read. How long you read will depend on the density, difficulty, and importance of what you are reading, as well as your purpose.
- Allocate regular time to read for each course, every week. In this way, you will **develop the habit** of reading and build your understanding of the course material incrementally.

Having difficulty focusing or maintaining your concentration while reading? Check out [some of our resources on the subject](#), including setting yourself up for success.

Know your purpose

Start by determining your purpose for reading a particular text. Ask yourself:

- **Why** are we being asked to read this?
- How does it **connect** to the lecture or tutorial content?
- What do I **already know** about this topic?
- How **important** is this reading for my learning?

Your purpose may also depend on the type of text you're reading. For example,

- in textbooks, your purpose may be **to clarify** the lecture material
- in scientific journals, it may be **to understand** procedural details and results
- in case studies, it may be **to identify common themes** and subsequent outcomes
- in literature, it may be **to identify themes, context, style, or structure**, or other literary devices.

The course learning objectives may also provide guidance as to the most important sources of information in the course.

Now, based on your purpose for reading, plan when and how to read.

When should I read?

Many students wonder whether it's better to complete the readings before or after class. Neither is necessarily better: when you read depends on the structure of the class and on your purpose for reading.

Here's an example of when and how to read **for students who need to use the reading to learn and remember the information thoroughly**.

Before reading

Start by skimming the text as a **preview**. Your aim here is not to read every word, but to get the big picture of the reading. How long is it? How is it structured? Are there any tables or figures? Does the reading include an abstract, a summary, a list of key terms, or a set of practice questions?

Make a plan, starting with setting your purpose for reading. If your **purpose is to learn the material**, you might say,

"This chapter looks really long and dense. It's too much to read in one sitting. I'll read half now, in the next two hours, and then the other half this afternoon, when I have another two-hour block of time. That'll get the reading done before class. I'm going to have to **take good notes**, too, because I know this is a major topic in this course."

During reading

Because you took the time to preview the text, you have a sense of what you are about to read. You identified the reading as dense and plan to read it over two sessions. Now, as you read to learn this material, reduce cognitive load by using **the 3-step approach**, paragraph by paragraph:

- **read** the paragraph or slide, focusing on understanding the material—don't write anything down yet.
- **take notes** on that paragraph (e.g., the main idea, key concepts, questions you have, connections to other material).
- **highlight** or colour-code the most important information (i.e., key terms or phrases). Aim to highlight no more than 20% of the text.

If you are using the SQ4R method, answer the header questions as you go, based on your purpose for reading.

After reading

When you've finished the reading, take a few minutes while the information is fresh in your mind to **summarize what you've read**. Keep it brief, about 4-6 sentences, and write it out in your own words. What was this reading about?

Then, when you've finished taking in information for that course for the week (i.e., from lectures and readings), **summarize again**: what did we learn this week? **Consolidate readings and lecture content** by making a 1-page summary or a mind map of that week's information. This summary will strongly support your understanding and ability to remember the information.

How to read

Start by previewing the text to get an overview of its structure and organization (e.g., headings, subheadings, summaries, key terms tables/figures, examples). Then, based on your purpose, choose to:

- skim to get the main ideas, or to check your understanding.
- read in-depth, spending more time on readings with unfamiliar, complex, or difficult content.
- read selectively if time is at a premium (e.g., focus on an article's abstract and conclusion).
Depending on your purpose, you may need to read it more closely when you have more time.

Expect to read texts twice. First to get the gist and second to get a deeper understanding, [making notes](#) to reinforce your memory for the information.

Active reading helps you to be more efficient and effective. Read with your purpose in mind, and try:

- thinking about your own prior knowledge of the subject before you begin reading
- making connections to what you already know or what you've already covered on the subject as you read
- reducing distractions while you read
- limiting your goals for reading (e.g., read for 30 minutes, or read five pages thoroughly)
- checking your comprehension as you read (e.g., summarizing periodically, self-questioning)
- interacting with the information while you read by asking questions, starting an internal dialogue or making notes in the margins
- reading for understanding before taking notes (whole text, or paragraph by paragraph).

Many of the reading strategies we suggest support active reading.

Strategies and approaches

3-step approach

The 3-step approach helps you focus and better understand what you're reading. It includes [note-taking](#) but is also an effective guide for reading.

Paragraph by paragraph (or slide by slide, if completing a module or working through lecture slides), go one step at a time:

- read, focusing on understanding the material—don't write anything down yet.
- take notes (e.g., the main idea of that paragraph, any questions you have or connections you make)
- highlight or colour code the most important information (i.e., key terms or phrases). Aim to highlight no more than 20% of the text.

SQ4R

Use the SQ4R method to improve your ability to understand, retain, and concentrate on what you read. It includes [note-taking](#) but is also an effective guide for reading.

- **Survey**
Skim to get a preview of the text you are about to read. How is it organized? What does it cover? Use elements like headings, visuals, key terms, summaries, and introductory sections (e.g., title, objectives) to help you.
- **Question**
Try turning headings and subheadings into questions. Reading with a question in mind makes the process more active, supporting memory and concentration. It also helps you to identify the most important, relevant information. For example, "Properties of the Bernoulli distribution" becomes *What are the properties of the Bernoulli distribution?*
- **Read and record**
Read section by section, seeking the answer to each question; focus on the main idea and the supporting information as it pertains to the question. Take notes as you go, in point form and in your own words.

- **Recite**
Cover up the text and see if you can answer the heading/subheading questions to check your understanding before moving on.
- **Review**
Take a break, then check your understanding again (i.e., repeat the process under Recite). This will further improve your memory of what you've read.

Preview, Read, Recall

This approach focuses on the three phases of reading: previewing, reading, and recalling information.

- **Preview**
Taking the time to **establish a general understanding** of the text and its structure will improve your comprehension and retention of the information when you read it. How is it structured? How long will it take to read? What are the main ideas covered?
- **Read**
Reading actively not only helps improve your comprehension and retention; it also helps you concentrate and fend off boredom. Make sure you set realistic goals (e.g., breaking up a long reading into manageable chunks), and do frequent comprehension checks (e.g., summarize each paragraph as you go, question your understanding, make links to what you already know).
- **Recall**
Support your retention of what you've read by **reviewing it immediately** (e.g., ask and answer questions, outline or summarize, mentally recall or recite out loud).

For more on the PRR method, see the [University of Texas at Austin](#) and [their handout](#).