

ASIGNATURA: INFORMÁTICA - FECHA: 13/7/2015

READING AND REMEMBERING



- Summary of this page
- The problem
- How to read academic texts
- A word on speed reading
- How to remember what you've read

SUMMARY OF THIS PAGE

How do you manage to get through your reading, and retain what you have read?

Always remember:

academic material is not meant to be read.

It is meant to be ransacked and pillaged for essential content.

- Be selective.
- Set a realistic time frame for any reading task.
- Never read without specific questions you want the text to answer.
- Never start reading at page 1 of the text, but look for the summary, conclusion, subheadings, etc.
- Read only as much as you need to get the information you are after.
- Always keep in mind what you need, what is relevant to the question you are asking the text.

How do you remember what you have read?

One of the basic principles of memory is that the quality of memory is related to the quality of your interaction with what you are trying to remember. If you have organised, dissected, questioned, reviewed and assessed the material you are reading, it will sit more firmly in your memory.

Consider this: why is it so easy to remember the contents of an article about something you are really interested in? It is because you get involved personally in the events and images the text portrays. You can harness some of the same memory potential in academic reading by adopting a particular kind of involved 'active reading'.

Learn to use your own cognitive strengths—visual, oral-aural, systematic, etc.—to create memorability in your reading. Imagine, visualise, recite, act out your academic material, get it out of the dry text-on-page (or screen) context and put some real life into it.

ASIGNATURA: INFORMÁTICA - FECHA: 13/7/2015

A final hint—don't take notes whilst you are reading. Instead, try dividing your reading into shortish sections, closing the book when you have read a section, and writing a summary from memory. The things you recall are strengthened in memory by the act of recall, and the correction of things you leave out or get wrong helps fix them in memory as well.

There is another bonus: you will find that by reading in anticipation of writing a summary, your reading improves by becoming more analytical and conscious of 'key points'. Try it and see.

The Academic Skills team run workshops during semester which will help you develop your reading and memory techniques.

THE PROBLEM

What is your first reaction when you look at the reading lists for your subjects? Is it something like: 'How on earth am I going to get through all that?'

When you add up the pages of books, chapters, articles, etc., it comes to a raw total which would be difficult to just get through, let alone remember, organise, and synthesise.

And of course, there are always problems such as material being unavailable—the article the lecturer says is vital for everyone to read, but there is only one copy of the publication in the library, and it has gone missing...

SO—how do you manage to get through your reading, and retain what you have read?

HOW TO READ ACADEMIC TEXTS

A first principle you might consider is:

Academic material is not meant to be read.

It is meant to be ransacked and pillaged for essential content.

This means that you should never just sit down to read academic works as if they were novels or Reader's Digest articles. Academic study is not suited to such an approach, and the chances are you could spend hours reading and then not have a clue what you have been reading about (does that sound familiar?). Instead, think about the following:

- **Don't feel that you must read everything on the reading list.**
- Use the reading list as a *guideline*—material on the list will often cover much the same ground, a list may sometimes have alternative items to cover different interests or library limitations, and some of the items on the list will be 'optional' to the extent that you can pass the subject without reading them.
- **Be selective.**
- Check through the items on your reading list.
- Which are basic texts, and which are more detailed? (Will you need basic information or more specific information for your assignment?)

ASIGNATURA: INFORMÁTICA - FECHA: 13/7/2015

- Which are the most accessible to you? (Texts which are crystal clear to one person may be incomprehensible to another, and vice versa—this is not a matter of 'intelligence', but of a preference for a particular presentation and style)
- Which are reasonably available? (It is no good pinning your hopes on a book if there is one copy in the library and 300 students wanting it.)
- **Set a realistic time frame for any reading task.**
- Do not read any longer than you can concentrate. It doesn't matter if your attention span is short—just set your tasks accordingly.
- **Never read without specific questions you want the text to answer.**
- If you want your reading to stay in your memory, you must approach your text with a list of questions about the particular information you are after, and search the text for the answers to those questions.
- Don't just read with the hope that an answer will appear.
- **Never start reading at page 1 of the text.**
- If there is a summary, a conclusion, a set of sub-headings, or an abstract, *read that first*, because it will give you a map of what the text contains. You can then deal with the text structurally, looking for particular points, not just reading 'blind' and so easily getting lost.
- **Read only as much as you need to get the information you are after.**
- For example, if a piece of information you need is in the abstract of an article, why read the whole article unless you have time to spare?
- If a point is clear from reading a summary, is there any benefit in reading through the complete text of a chapter?
- If you are interested in the overall findings of a study, do you really need to read the methodology and results sections?
- Always keep in mind what you need, what is relevant to the question you are asking the text.
- **There are many 'tricks of the trade' you will either learn or discover for yourself.**
- For example, rather than reading all of a series of articles on a topic, consider whether the literature review in the last article of the series will give you enough to go on with. You can be infinitely creative with your time- and labour-saving strategies. Look for new ways, and talk with other students about how they manage.
- **Don't panic if you cannot get hold of a particular text.**
- Information may be found in various places, and Canberra is better-supplied with libraries than most other places in the country. Think about looking further afield and being creative in your information searches.

A WORD ON 'SPEED READING'

From time to time outside companies advertise 'speed reading' courses for university students. Some of them are quite expensive, and the level of satisfaction among students is not very high. Speed reading has its uses, but it is certainly not the answer to all the reading needs of university students. Getting through text is only a small part of the reading/remembering task. It doesn't really matter how much stuff you get through—if it doesn't get into your understanding, it is useless.

REMEMBERING WHAT YOU'VE READ

If you follow the points above, you will find that you take in a lot more than you would if you just dived into the text. One of the basic principles of memory is that *the quality of memory is related to the quality of your interaction with what you are trying to remember.*

ASIGNATURA: INFORMÁTICA - FECHA: 13/7/2015

Obviously, if you have organised, dissected, questioned, reviewed and assessed the material you are reading, it will sit more firmly in your memory, and be more accessible.

There are many ‘memory systems’ available, some current and commercially promoted, some of great antiquity (the ancient Romans, for example, had some interesting systems). If you want to have a look at some of these, fine—they work for some people. However, if you are looking at something which is going to cost you hard-earned cash, think carefully! There are a lot of folk around after an easy dollar

You might like to consider this: *why is it so easy to remember the contents of an article about something you are really interested in, or the even more complex contents of a good novel?* The answers might have something to do with interest, not having to read them, etc., but it also has a great deal to do with the sort of interaction the reader has with such material. For example, when you read a novel or story you are not just dealing with text—you are getting involved personally in the events and images the text portrays. You feel sad or happy or outraged at what happens, and you probably see the events and scenes described as clearly as if you were seeing it all on film.

The link between recreational reading and a heavy academic text may not be obvious. You may feel like crying over a book on economics or neurophysiology, but the reasons will be very different to those with a good novel! However, you can harness some of the same memory potential in academic reading by adopting a particular kind of ‘active reading’.

For example, try envisaging yourself as a professional in the field you are studying, actually using the stuff you are reading to give advice or solve problems. Getting involved with the knowledge you are trying to absorb, making it *personal*, greatly enhances its memorability (some time ago we had a group of law students enacting *Rumpole* or *The Practice* scenarios with the cases they had to study, and apart from being highly amusing, it made the material much easier to come to grips with).

Learn to use your own cognitive strengths—visual, oral-aural, systematic, etc.—to *create memorability* in your reading. Imagine, visualise, recite, act out your academic material, get it out of the dry text-on-page (or screen) context and put some real life into it. Even just applying your growing knowledge to the day’s news headlines can be enormously helpful, and so can telling people about the understanding you are developing about issues that come up in conversation.

Importantly, don't try to memorise everything! You don't have to be a parrot or a recording machine. Make sure you understand the main points of what you are reading.

The Academic Skills team run workshops during semester which will help you develop your reading and memory techniques, and we can help you on a one-to-one basis by appointment. We can cover much more than this brief article contains, so get in touch with the ASP!

A final hint—when you are reading, particularly for revision, think about *not* taking notes.

It is easy to fall into a note-taking mode that is almost mechanical transcription, and little of what you are writing gets into memory. Instead, try dividing your reading into shortish sections, closing the book when you have read a section, and writing a summary from

ASIGNATURA: INFORMÁTICA - FECHA: 13/7/2015

memory. The things you recall are strengthened in memory by the act of recall, and the correction of things you leave out or get wrong helps fix them in memory as well.

There is another bonus: you will find that by reading in anticipation of writing a summary, your reading improves by becoming more analytical and conscious of 'key points'. Try it and see.