

READING: Suggestions for action

One place to start is by thinking about the overall amount of reading you set for students, especially where some are still developing their capability in English. You might think about:

- **Including a realistic statement about reading time** in the course handbook. It may be difficult to estimate a time that fits all students but your best guess might alert students who are taking far longer to the need to seek out more efficient reading strategies. Some are suggested in the guides listed in 'additional resources' below.
- **Creating differentiated reading lists.** Early course handbooks could define a reading list then distinguish between essential 'must-read' texts, additional texts (stating what this means) and optional extras. One international student describes how he went one step further: 'I read every article [on the list] with my dictionary. It was terrible. One student asked me to join a reading group and this was great. The four of us divided the list and each read one then we met and talked about it then decided if we needed to read it ourselves. We saved so much time and energy' (Reinders, Moore & Lewis, 2008, p. 85)
- **Annotating reading lists.** Explain why each text is included and what students will find useful from reading it.
- **Seeking out accessible, clear texts.** This is probably especially important towards the start of a programme. If you are not sure about a text's readability, English Language specialists are usually happy to provide advice. Ryan (2005) suggests using electronic materials for faster searching of relevant information, providing glossaries of key terms and concepts, and ensuring students get lists early – all pointers that reflect the importance of time and understandability.
- **Model reading of a key text,** demonstrating effective strategies for identifying the usefulness of a text, or in gaining an overall picture of the central themes and arguments prior to a full reading. This may include first looking at key information such as titles and section headings, abstracts, introductions and conclusions, and topic sentences.

As well as examining what you ask students to read, you can help students become more critical readers, defined by Reinders et al. (2008) as 'not only to be able to understand the meaning of a text but also to be able to assess its value' (p. 99). Grasso (2005) refers to critical reading as requiring the ability to recognise hidden assumptions, bias and the author's motives, all of which assumes considerable shared background cultural knowledge between reader and author. Where this is not the case, teacher intervention becomes even more important.

To support students in embarking on this difficult and possibly unfamiliar way of reading, you might provide structure through:

- trigger questions to accompany texts
- templates to record particular aspects or characteristics in the text
- a reading log where students summarise what they have read.

All are likely to be more effective if you discuss the entries in subsequent classes and make explicit links to students' academic writing. Discussion also helps students judge issues of authority and reliability, perhaps asking 'What's the difference between the reading for this week and something you find on Wikipedia?' Interaction and structured monitoring help all students assess the 'value' of what they read.

Build links with the library and use library expertise early

The proliferation of online and electronic sources of information continues to reshape the role of libraries in tertiary education. However, critical readers use libraries and library databases regularly, even if they do not physically go to them.

By building library use into an authentic task early in their programmes, teachers can enhance students' awareness of what a university library offers and how it can be used. Many international students rate librarians as a key and accessible source of help and support and the earlier they discover this, the better for their later success.

Help students keep track of what they read

Postgraduate programmes often build in ways to record reading, perhaps through software packages to record bibliographic details or requiring students to use cover sheets with headings (e.g. title, full reference, themes, content notes, action to be done as a result of reading). Students then use the template and complete it for each article, book or report they read. Where such activities are designed into programmes, monitored and above all, discussed, they are more likely to occur in the first place and to feed into writing, tutorials or supervisions. Undergraduates may need equally structured ways of building a personal reading collection.

Find ways to support and encourage note making

The first step might be signaling the value of notes. You could include mention of notes in task briefs or list them as steps in the research process. Some teachers ask for them to be shared and peer reviewed alongside drafts or stop briefly in lectures to give students a chance to review their own notes or to compare their notes with those of their neighbour. Some teachers talk to students about useful note making strategies. One example, under the title 'Making notes to support critical reading' (Cottrell, 2005, p. 153-164) tells students what to do, provides templates and examples, and explains why the effort is worthwhile. Note making skills are especially important for students who are not confident of their English. They risk retaining too close a copy of the original text in their notes unless they adopt a strategy based on summary rather than quotations and paraphrasing (Shi, 2004). The use of Mind Maps or other concept mapping techniques can also be useful for students in identifying key ideas and information and connections between them. The ubiquitous highlighter prompts Godfrey (2010, p. 91) to advise 'Go easy on the highlighter' and makes a case for occasional use in margins to denote useful sections or even better, in students' own notes to point to key elements.

Top Tip

Think about the amount of unseen reading you ask students to do in examinations. When Schmitt (2007) investigated this issue by looking through several years of papers across all faculties in one UK university she found wide variation and cause for concern: A number of the exams reviewed use case studies; the length of these ranges from one paragraph to 12 pages The reading load of case studies is very likely to have a negative impact on EFL students' performance on an exam due to their slower reading speed. This is even true if they have been given the case study to read in advance. Case study questions require that students repeatedly refer back to the case study and their notes while they write. EFL students will require more time for this reading than will native speaker students. Attending to the overall reading load means teachers can reduce these concerns and improve all students' ability to show their knowledge rather than their reading speed.