

## TIPS ON READING AND TAKING NOTES

Reading is a fundamental aspect of university life. We all know how to read, but we need to read effectively in an academic context.

### 1. Why are we reading?

In an academic context, **you are not reading as a dilettante**. The knowledge you gain will be used in discussions, in essays, exams, term papers and Honours theses.

There are several reasons to read:

1. To understand a message.
2. To find data.
3. To answer a question.
4. To give a critical evaluation of a text.

**For what course are you reading this material?** You will come across some of the same texts in different courses and a lot of the same authors, but you are not trying to learn the same things in different courses. For instance, if you are reading a text by Malinowski, you will focus on different aspects in a course on anthropological theory and in a course on anthropology of religion. Also, the same text might be read in different ways in anthropology and in other disciplines.

Once you have situated the readings, you are ready to read. It is important to clearly set out the goals you wish to attain by reading a specific text. Are you looking for data or a theoretical approach? Are you reading to prepare an exam or to write an essay?

#### 1.1 Reading exam questions

When we talk of reading, we think of articles and books. However, **one of the most important things you will have to read is exam questions**. No matter what the stress level or time constraint is, you will never spend too much time reading and understanding an exam question. If it has more than one part, identify each part clearly and make sure you answer every aspect of the question. Are there hints in the question? For instance, "Is it ALWAYS true that X?" suggests that there might be exceptions.

#### 1.2 Reading for an essay

There are two steps involved in reading for an essay.

In a first step, you try to identify, evaluate, and eliminate sources. You are trying to gather material relating to your general area of research in order to develop, refine, and clarify your essay topic. You are identifying whether various texts are appropriate or not for your topic. In the process, you make a preliminary outline of your paper.

Then you read the material you have retained from the previous step, seeking documentation for each part of your outline.

### 2. Put the reading in context

- Situate the text in its socio-historical context: What were the dominant views of the period? What knowledge was available to the author?
- Before you start reading, ask yourself why you are reading a text and where this text is situated in the various sections and sub-sections of a course.

### 3. Find the structure of the text

Before you start reading, you want to find a road map of the text. Look the text (or book) over. How is it organised? What are the headings? In which order are they presented? Which sections are given more attention by the author? If there is no table of contents, write down the headings (and sub-headings) and read them to grasp the content and logic of the text. After that, read the introduction and conclusion. If the text is well structured, these sections spell out, the goals and important ideas of the paper.

### 4. How to take notes

There is no point in underlining 50% of the text. Even if it is very well-written, a text contains much information which is not pertinent or crucial for your paper. While reading, you need to keep both the author's goal and your goals in mind. The two may not be identical.

When you first read a text, identify important ideas, arguments, definitions, etc. in the margin of the text (**except if it is a library book: marking a library book is vandalism; for library books, you can mark passages with Post-it notes**). At this stage, don't try to take notes; you don't know yet where the argument is going. When you have read the whole paper, it will be easier to identify the important passages; this is the best time to take notes.

Generally, there is one main idea in each paragraph. Identify the idea and judge if it is useful or important to your assignment. If it is, write it down. The important thing is not to make extensive notes, but to **extract** the relevant material. If you find yourself noting a lot of material which is not obviously relevant, then it is time to return to your plan and evaluate the goals of your assignment.

Your reading notes take many forms; they might be on note cards, in a notebook, or directly on your computer. Notes need to be clear, since you will refer to them instead of the original text once your reading is done. There are different types of notes.

- Direct quotes. Make sure that you use quotation marks to identify them as quotes, otherwise you risk committing plagiarism in your paper. Make sure that your quotes are exact. Check that no word is missing or added, and that you use the same spelling as the author. Clearly identify the text and page. (In a paper, you quote only when a paraphrase does not convey the information better or more concisely. A quote must be brief, less than a paragraph.)
- Summaries of arguments or ideas.
- Factual data.
- Your own reactions to the text, e.g. whether or not you agree with the author, and why. Indicate clearly in your notes that these are your views, not the author's.

**A reading note might look something like this if you use note cards:**

<b>Keyword</b> (1 or 2, at the most)	<b>Reference*</b>
The keyword is important; it will help you classify your material	Lakoff (1987:56)
<b>Here you would write the quote or summarise an idea</b> (Remember, one idea per card)	

At the bottom you can write your comments, refer to another section or page that complements this one, etc.

\* **The first time you write a reference write it out completely. Subsequently, you can use an abridged format.**

**If you prefer taking your notes in a notebook, they might look something like this:**

This is the margin	Reference
Keywords	Here you would write the quote or summarise an idea
	Here you can write your comments, refer to another section or page, etc.

You can reproduce this format on note cards or notebook, whichever you decide to use. Other formats that work better for you.

## **5. Developing an overall view of the argument**

Notes allow you to record material for an assignment. Sometimes, the assignment requires a thorough analysis of the text, i.e. the author's goals, the main and secondary arguments, their logical structure, the data on which these arguments are based, and the relationship between all these aspects. You will gain a better understanding of a text if you find the logic behind it. It will force you to make connections, identify which point refers to which other, clarify the importance of various arguments, etc.

One of the best, and least time-consuming ways to go about this is to represent graphically the ideas and their relationships. We tend to remember things better if they are represented graphically. Key words such as: if, then, hence, and, because, but, etc., help establish links, as do arrows and other symbols. In most cases, a graphic presentation of a paper's main arguments fits in a single page.

### **Graphic representation of the logic and arguments of a text**

#### **1. Why did the author write the text?**

To refute an argument, report a discovery, critique a theoretical assumption or add to it, etc.  
EXAMPLE: **Smith**, pretends that A causes B, because of facts 1-2-3. **Turner** sets out to demonstrate that it cannot be so, because facts 7-8 are not taken into account by **Smith**.

#### **2. What is the author's goal?**

What is the author out to prove, demonstrate, critique refute? How, Why?(no more than one line)  
EXAMPLE: To demonstrate that facts 1-2-3 are not sufficient to explain the causal relation of A to B, but that facts 7 and 8 must also be taken into consideration.

#### **3. What example, data or illustration does the author use as a demonstration?**

**Turner's findings:**

**IF**  
**A CAUSES B**  
(Describe A) (Describe B)  
**BECAUSE OF FACTS**

- 1 (Describe fact 1)
- 2 (Describe fact 2)
- 3 (Describe fact 3)

**AS SMITH SUGGESTS,**

**WHY, WHEN APPLIED TO EXAMPLES**

- 1 (Outline example 1)
- 2 (Outline example 2)
- 3 (Outline example 3)

Where facts 1 - 2 - 3 are present:

A does not cause B

**BECAUSE,**

in order for A to cause B

**Facts**

7 (Describe)

8 (Describe)

**MUST ALSO BE PRESENT**

**CONCLUSION**

**A does cause B**

**if, in addition to Facts 1 - 2 - 3**

**Facts 7-8 are also taken into consideration**