

READING AT UNIVERSITY
A Guide for Students

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Preface

In this book we want to talk about reading – and especially about reading as a student. It has arisen from our experience of helping students to develop the study skills and disciplines they need for success. As a result, though the main focus of the book is on reading, we also raise issues and give advice about other aspects of study.

We would like to acknowledge the help of the many students over the years whose problems with reading gave us the idea for this book. We also want to say thank you to Mary West (who may be the oldest copy-editor and proof-reader in regular employment on the planet), to Thomas Fairbairn who is possibly the most demanding copy-editor on the planet, and to Faith Fairbairn who knows some really good jokes, for example, ‘What do Alexander the Great and Winnie the Pooh have in common?’ (answer on page 194) and who noticed that we had omitted the word ‘are’ in a sentence that made no sense.

Thanks are also due to our colleagues at the Open University Press who put up with the delays this book suffered because of personal problems that occurred while we were working on it, especially to Shona Mullen and Anita West. Finally, we would

like to thank Professor Donna Mead, Head of the School of Care Sciences at the University of Glamorgan, for her continued support.

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An introductory note

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING AS A STUDENT

Along with writing and reasoning, reading is one of the most important activities in which students have to engage. This is a fact of life. It is also, unfortunately, a fact of life that most students have problems with reading. There always seems to be too much reading to do and never enough time in which to do it. Reading lists are often too long, lecturers give too many obscure references and even if you were simply to follow up your main interests you would soon find (if you have not done so already) that there is too much information to absorb and too little time in which to absorb it. As a result some students form the view that if only they could read faster, things would be better. Perhaps that is why you have opened this book.

Now, of course there are some advantages to getting through the reading you have to do in the shortest time possible, including the fact that it may give you the chance to do something else with the time you save. That is why a book that claimed to teach students to read faster would probably be an instant success.

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Despite our belief that this is the case, this is not that book and you will be disappointed if you read it thinking that it is.

Better readers make more successful students

Though we will say something both about reading skills and about how to read faster, our primary aim is to get you to think more carefully about your reading – about your reasons for reading, about how and where you read, and about what you do as a result of your reading. We want to urge you to take an active and creative approach, engaging with your sources, interrogating them and using them to build the viewpoints that you present in your essays.

We reject the idea that becoming a good reader is simply a matter of developing skills and strategies. Students who wish to become good readers will have to learn to glean information efficiently from what they read; they will also have to learn to interact creatively and critically with it. They will have to become disciplined readers – who form and maintain good habits, and use their time well, employing the skills and strategies they develop. Too often we make poor use of skills that we have developed, for example in driving our cars and in preparing and cooking nutritious food; something similar is true of the ways in which we use our skills as readers.

Our experience has convinced us that with a small amount of effort, most students can become better readers and hence more successful students.

Who is this book for?

The issues we address are relevant for students of all disciplines; that is why we have tried, where possible, to use wide-ranging examples. In addition, *Reading at University* is aimed at students at all stages – from the senior years of school, through further education to undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, if you aren't a student, please don't put the book down just yet. Perhaps, though you are not a student, you picked it up because you are less efficient as a reader than you would like to be, and

you wondered whether you might pick up some tips that could help you. We think you probably can.

What's the point of reading as a student?

Along with listening and observation, reading is an important way in which we gain information about the world. It will underpin much of your academic work as a student, just as it underpins (or should underpin) much of the academic life of your lecturers. Academics must read. They must read in order to become and remain aware of their subject, to keep their knowledge and understanding up to date, and to check their work and ideas and research against those of their peers. You will have to read in order to inform yourself about the subjects you are studying and to allow you to adopt a scholarly approach to your written work. By a 'scholarly approach' we mean one in which you relate what you write to what others have written on the same and related topics.

Reading is one of the most important activities in which you will have to engage, and skill in reading is one of the most important that you will need to develop. Actually that isn't quite right. Reading isn't just one skill, it's a set of skills and in *Reading at University* we will be inviting you to think about some of these. Not only that, but reading is not only a matter of skill. It is also a matter of discipline. As is the case with any skill, including writing and the construction and analysis of arguments, unless you take the trouble to use and to practise your skills as a reader, they will never improve, and your reading will be less beneficial than it could be. That is why we believe that the skills and disciplines of reading are worth acquiring and practising, even if it takes some time and effort to do so, because in the long run – like money invested in stocks and shares – they'll pay dividends.

It is because reading is a major part of the activity in which students have to engage that most reputable guides to study skills give at least some space to discussing it. For example, such guides often present a pot pourri of techniques aimed at helping students to read faster and more efficiently. This book also contains guidance about a variety of ways of reading better, as well as tasks which offer you opportunities for developing your skills

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as a reader. However, we are committed to the idea that there is more to reading better than reading faster and more efficiently. That is why our main aim in this book is to persuade you to change not only the ways in which you read, but also the ways in which you think about your reading.

Is learning to read better really worth the time and effort?

Perhaps, until you picked up this book, you had never really thought about reading. Like breathing and walking, it may be so much part of your life that you can't remember a time when you couldn't read. Perhaps you have never considered the possibility that you could learn to read better. We want to convince you not only that improving your reading is possible, but that putting in the small amount of time and effort necessary to do so would be worthwhile.

Some students might think it a foolish waste of precious time to engage in the attempt to improve their reading. They are entitled to their opinion, but they are wrong. Just as those who engage in gymnastic activities of various kinds can improve their performance – for example, by making it stronger, faster or more elegant – those who engage in reading can improve their performance by making it more thoughtful and focused, more detailed, rigorous and effective.

When we read for pleasure, the activity of reading is important in itself. In reading fiction, we read in order to gain pleasurable experiences (even when the subject matter in itself is not pleasant) through our ability imaginatively to inhabit a new world – seeing, feeling and hearing new things. When we read academic texts, on the other hand, we are not motivated primarily by the pleasure we gain by doing so. Most academic reading is motivated by the desire to find, understand and absorb information, ideas and arguments.

Focusing, as we do in this book, on the activity of reading rather than on the information that academic texts contain might be likened to focusing on a window rather than on the view to which it gives us access. An even closer analogy would be with a situation in which we focused on a piece of optical equipment

such as a microscope, when what we are really interested in are the cells that we wish to bring into sharper focus. The point is that, just as by polishing a window we can make it easier to see what lies beyond, and by polishing and adjusting the lenses on a microscope we can bring into closer focus the object of our attention, so by polishing up and improving our reading skills we can make it easier to access the information that texts contain.

With the increasing emphasis in many universities and colleges on what is euphemistically referred to as 'resource-based learning', the need for students to develop not only skill as readers, but a disciplined approach to reading, has never been more evident. In an earlier book (Fairbairn and Winch 1996) one of us drew attention to the use, by one university, of what it referred to as the 'FOFO' model, by which it aimed to turn students into autonomous learners by giving them responsibility for their own learning. The acronym FOFO arises from the central plank of the model. At an early point in their career all students were taught that in researching for their essays and assignments they should 'First Organise and Find Out'. This is good advice which could not only underpin a worthwhile study skills programme but also a worthwhile approach to study. However, cynicism, combined with an unfortunate lack of resources, led many students of this university to give another meaning to the first part of the acronym, which you may imagine, but which we couldn't possibly print in a book of this kind.

The cynicism of the students in the FOFO example is shared by many academic staff, though in their case it relates to what they take to be the unstated motivation of senior managers who they believe embrace student-centred and resource-based learning in order to cut costs. To some extent we share this sceptical view of the reasons that student-directed learning has become popular. However, we also believe strongly that the primary responsibility for getting information into a student's head rests with the student, rather than with those who teach him. The responsibility of lecturers is to motivate and interest students, supporting them in the intellectual work necessary to come to terms with new ideas and information, rather than spoonfeeding them with knowledge which they passively absorb. This has an implication in terms of the ways in which, and the extent to which, we believe that university and college lecturers should

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guide and direct students in their reading. For example, it inclines us towards the view that the use of 'reading lists' often hinders rather than helps students' development.

Whatever the rationale of the move towards students being given more responsibility for accessing information during their studies, the importance of reading for study is clear. It is even more clear in the case of students studying through distance learning institutions like The Open University, where the primary mode of instruction is the course text, which may be thought of as a series of 'written lectures'. In the case of students in institutions with highly developed IT facilities, significant amounts of teaching and other information may be conveyed or made available via the Internet, which again may involve more reading than a traditional lecturing approach.

Whatever the institution, the course and the approaches to teaching and learning that are adopted, it is clear that the better you are and become at reading, the better. This is true, even though it is commonly argued that reading will become less important as books and traditional academic journals are overtaken by electronic media as the mainstay for academic and intellectual communication, including teaching and the sharing of original research and theoretical developments. Electronic media, including CD ROM and DVD, 'e-books', and the Internet (with its oceans of sometimes high quality information sources – including Internet journals with standards of scholarship that are equivalent to their paper counterparts), are having a major impact in academic life, not least in the way in which courses are delivered. Nonetheless, we feel confident that for the foreseeable future the skills and disciplines of reading will be central to students' lives.

The revolution in information technology has affected both the ways in which and the ease with which information can be made accessible, in much the same way as the invention of the printing press and television. It has also provided possibilities for interactive work and learning through on-line discussion and videoconferencing. Finally, the rise of electronic media has made it possible for the written or printed word to be combined with other forms of communication in published academic products. Authors who choose to communicate via, for example, the Internet can now illustrate and argue for their conclusions, using not only photographs but also film and sound. However, as with older

communications technologies such as print, film and television, we should exercise caution, rigorously assessing the quality of information available.

In any case, in spite of the rise of the Internet as a source of information, it has not yet taken away the centrality of reading as a way of accessing information for academic purposes. Indeed, unless we move to a technology in which most information is conveyed aurally or pictorially or by some yet to be invented system (perhaps ECMDDT – Electronic Computer to Mind Direct Data Transfer?), reading – whether from hard copy in the form of printed material, or from a computer screen – will remain highly significant.

But aren't most students already competent readers?

By the time they get to university or college, most students will already be reasonably competent readers. For example, as well as being able to decode print in a way that allows you to guess how unknown words will sound when spoken, you will be able to use clues supplied by the text to guess at the meanings of words with which you are unfamiliar, and to infer meanings that are implied though not stated. It is likely also that you will be able to predict at least some of what is coming as you read and that, to some extent, you will be able to infer meanings and ideas from print without reading every word, though you may revert to doing so when you come across material with which you are unfamiliar, especially if new and complex-sounding or specialized words are used.

Unfortunately, in spite of their experience as readers, or perhaps even because of it, most students will have gaps in their reading skills, just as they will have gaps in other basic study skills – in writing and in time management, for example. This is likely to be true of you just as much as it is of your fellow students. Why else would you be reading, in however superficial a way, a book about ways of improving your reading at university?

Between us we have studied a frighteningly diverse set of subjects at either undergraduate or postgraduate level including geology, geography, maths, chemistry, physics, biology, psychology,

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music, primary and special education, educational research methods, statistics, computer studies and philosophy. By referring to our time as students in such a wide range of areas, we do not intend to draw attention to how well educated we are – but to give some credibility to our claim to know that reading has immense importance in the study of most, if not all, academic subjects. Not only that, but we think we can remember enough about our own experience as students to allow us to enter imaginatively into the lives of student readers from a range of disciplines.

GETTING TO KNOW THIS BOOK

In this book, though our main aim is to talk about reading, what we have to say will impinge, also, on other study skills including time management, note taking, writing and the assessment of arguments, because all of these will be intermingled in your life as a student.

What do we hope to achieve?

We want to give you some help in becoming the best and most effective reader that you can be, in order that you can get as much benefit out of your studies as possible, while having the maximum possible amount of time left for all the other things you have to do and want to do.

We address a wide range of concerns and needs that are common to all students. One of these you are likely to share with most students throughout history – from the time when students literally went to universities to ‘read’ for a degree because, along with religious centres, they were the only places where books were to be found in quantity. We are referring to the concern that most students have about the relatively small amount of time they are able to devote to reading the mountains of material that they are either told they must read, or decide they need to read. Quite apart from the fact that there is too much written in relation to almost everything to allow you to hope ever to read even a tiny fraction of what has been written about your subject,

other activities are also important and need to be given time – writing assignments and reports, eating and drinking, listening to music and talking to friends, to name but a few. The time that you can make available for reading will clearly never be enough. You will have to learn to live with this fact, without letting it depress you. Bear in mind that what really matters isn't how much you read, but the use that you make of the reading that you do.

As a student you will have to read in a variety of ways, at a range of levels and for many different purposes. We want to help you to develop as a reader who is able to approach a range of reading tasks in a disciplined way, equipped with appropriate and helpful strategies. We will do this both by sharing ideas and by inviting you to try out some suggestions for approaches that we believe can help you.

How to read this book

How you go about reading this book will depend upon the ways in which you have developed as a reader so far. If you have already developed sophisticated skills and strategies as a reader of academic texts, you may be reading this because you are approaching the book in a fairly systematic way to assess its relevance. If this is the case, you may have tried to gain a feel for the level at which it is pitched, by first looking at the blurb on the back cover, the contents list and the index, then at the beginnings and ends of its main parts, and at sections with headings that caught your attention – such as 'How to read this book'. Such a procedure, which we discuss in more detail later, will often help you to decide whether a book is worth borrowing or even buying. As a result of such scrutiny, you may have formed the view that this introduction offers a brief and easy overview that would be worth reading in detail, before proceeding to parts of the book that seem to address your particular concerns.

On the other hand, you might have begun reading the book at the beginning – in the expectation that you will then read through from cover to cover, in the hope that you might gain some ideas about how to improve your reading. If this is the case, we suggest that you should turn to our discussion of ways of approaching

unfamiliar texts and of deciding whether or not they are worthwhile reading (see pages 90–6).

Tasks

Scattered throughout the book you will find a number of tasks. Some are designed to help you to get to know yourself as a reader. They invite you to think about aspects of your experience of reading, and the ways in which you read. This should help you to decide which aspects of your reading habits and approaches are most in need of attention. Other tasks give you the opportunity to try out or practise strategies and skills that you may find helpful.

How much time you commit to these tasks is up to you. However, we hope you will be willing to give at least a little thought to the questions we raise, and a little time to the exercises we propose, because we believe that you will find them helpful in developing as a skilled, disciplined and thoughtful reader. Some tasks ask you to do things away from this book, using material to which you have access in your home, or in your institutional or local library. Others ask you to work with material that we supply. Most of the exercises have no definitive ‘answer’; however, we offer comments about some, and possible responses to others. Sometimes these comments and responses are to be found towards the end of the book, because we want to encourage you to undertake the exercise without first looking at what we have said about it; where this is the case, you will be directed to the appropriate page.

Language and style

There are, finally, a few things that we should tell you about the language and style we have adopted in writing this book.

Essays or assignments?

In referring to the writing that students have to undertake, we use the terms ‘assignment’ and ‘essay’ interchangeably, even

though an essay is a particular form of assignment and one in which some students will rarely be asked to engage. We have done this because the essay is a very common form of assignment and we wanted to avoid cumbersome references to 'essays, reports, and assignments of other kinds'. And so whenever you read a reference to essays and/or assignments, you should take us to be referring to whatever forms of written assessment you are expected to complete.

Style

Although this is a book about reading, we recognize that the reading you will do as a student will inevitably be linked closely to your writing. And so from time to time we take the opportunity to share some of what we believe about academic writing style. We hope that we can influence you into developing a style that, as far as is possible, emulates the good academic writers whose work, with any luck, you will read during your studies, and, at a minimum, avoids the pitfalls of many of the poor academic writers whose work you will inevitably come across.

As a result of our beliefs in the value of simplicity, the style in which we have written this book is probably different from that of many if not most of the books you will read as a student. We are discursive and at times anecdotal, couching advice in discussions of our experience both as teachers and as students, because we believe strongly that useful learning often comes about through the sharing of experience. Unlike many academic writers, we have tried to avoid difficult words and jargon where possible, with the aim of making the book as easy to read, as inviting and non-intimidating as possible. We wanted to tell you this because we would hate you to form the impression that just because we try to avoid using difficult words where possible, we can't be real academics like the authors of many of the articles in academic journals and books with which you will come into contact, and some of which you will read.

Obviously as a student you will have to attend to the stylistic requirements of your subject and to the demands that your lecturers make. However, we strongly recommend that you should take careful note of which authors are most successful in engaging and communicating with you as a reader, and that, where

possible, you should try to incorporate elements of their style into your work.

Learning to spot good and poor academic style can also help you in developing a feel for texts that are worth reading and skill in spotting those that are worth leaving well alone. Given the limited time you can spend on reading, it is generally better (all things being equal – for example, the texts in question being of similar significance, to the best of your knowledge) to use your time in reading texts that communicate easily and well, than to waste it on texts that are so poorly written that you can barely understand what they are about.

Portfolios of good and bad academic writing

You may find it helpful to compile a portfolio of examples of good academic writing that you come across. You will be able to spot good academic writing, because it will be successful in communicating ideas and arguments – however complex. Use a loose leaf file to catalogue and store photocopied examples of such writing, which may comprise anything from individual paragraphs or pages, through to complete chapters from books, or journal articles. Alongside each item insert a few notes about why you think it is successful. For example, is it successful because it uses short sentences or simple words; because it is written in the first person, or because it largely avoids jargon?

It is also worth compiling a collection of examples of bad academic writing, including stuff that is unreadable and fails to communicate anything other than the impression that its author must be very, very intelligent if she knows what she is talking about. Catalogue and store examples of bad academic writing that you come across, again with a few notes about why they are unsuccessful in communicating.

Whether we have been successful in writing simply and directly, in a way that makes what we want to say as easy for you to follow as possible, is for you to judge. Whatever you decide, we stick by our belief that simplicity is generally a virtue in academic writing, whether it is aimed at professional or student academics.

First, second or third person?

You will perhaps find us rather promiscuous in the way that we seem to drift between the use of the first, second and third person. In other words, although much of the time, identifying ourselves directly as those who are speaking, we adopt the first person, using expressions such as 'We believe that . . .'; 'We hope that you might . . .' and 'To return for a moment to what we said about . . .', we also sometimes write (more distantly some would say) in the third person, using sentences such as 'It is because reading is a major part of the activity in which students have to engage, that most reputable guides to study . . .'. Lastly, we sometimes address you directly using the second person, in sentences like 'However, if you aren't a student, please don't put the book down just yet.'

Despite the prejudices of those academics who believe that the third person and the third person alone should be used in academic work, the first person is often used very effectively in the rigorous development of arguments. Nonetheless you will find that academic work is most often written in the third person. Indeed, even in disciplines such as psychology, education and nursing where the first person is used by many authors, its use is often frowned upon. Depending on your subject and the personal views of your lecturers, you may find that you are required to adopt the third person in your written work.

Gender

Finally, we should say something about the ways in which we have attempted to address the offence that gender-specific language causes some people. In other words, we should tell you how we have chosen to avoid the overuse of the pronouns 'he', 'his' and 'him', which used to characterize most non-fiction writing.

Some authors attempt to deal with the problem by always using plural forms of pronouns: 'them', 'they' and 'their', even when they are referring to individuals; we have rejected this strategy because we find the results stylistically offensive. For similar reasons, we have chosen not to enter into the habit of always referring to 'he/she', 'him/her' or 'his/her' (or 'her/him',

'her/his' or 'she/he' – or, even worse, 's/he'). Nonetheless, because we want to recognize that there are both female and male people in the world, and because we want to avoid offending anyone who may be lying in wait, waiting to be offended, we have tried to be consistent in the use of the following strategy, unless its use would cause confusion.

When we are referring to specific individuals we use pronouns that are appropriate to their gender. However, when we are referring to non-identified students we usually refer to them using male pronouns, and in general, when we are referring to non-identified academics or writers, we use female pronouns. Finally, where individuals to whom we refer are neither students nor academics/writers, we try our best to avoid the overuse of either female or male pronouns. Although this strategy may have some odd results – including the possibility that it might induce a casual reader into thinking that we believe that most students are men while most academics and writers are women – this seems less important to us than the attempt to avoid offence while maintaining some kind of stylistic integrity.

PART 1: Thinking about reading and about yourself as a reader

Toby was neu years old and had a holl of oun ret. His great-
est vilt was a tecture called Fred. Toby lev Fred each yak
and gave him holls of welt to pock, he even beck him cutch
peus when he could get them from his kult. Fred was mump
enough to pell in the gelt of Toby's fing and remp his juges.

(Raban 1982)

In Part 1 we invite you to think about yourself as a reader, exploring the ways in which you read and reflecting on how you came to read like this. We ask you to consider whether your reading skills and disciplines and the ways in which you think about and approach reading are as helpful as they might be.

THINKING ABOUT READING

What is reading? You may think that this is a foolish question to ask you – because, for example, you've been a reader for so long that it's obvious you know what reading is. Learning to read is one of the first things children do in school and, at a basic level,

schools do a good job in teaching most children to read. Nonetheless, the question of what reading is, is not simple. Reading is a complex set of different activities requiring a range of skills. Reflecting on this complexity and on the range of ways in which you can read should help you to become a better reader.

Most often when we talk of 'learning to read' we are talking about the early stages of reading – the first stumbling steps that we take as children in decoding print and beginning to understand that those odd marks on the page carry meaning. There is a good deal of disagreement about the best way of teaching children to read, which is arguably rooted in different ways of thinking about reading. For example, a teacher who emphasizes the ability to work out what words will sound like, and encourages children to 'sound out' new words letter by letter or syllable by syllable, will have a different conception of reading than one who uses the 'look and say' approach, which emphasizes the recognition of whole words. Of course, recognizing the advantages of doing so, good teachers in primary schools have embraced both emphases for many years and nowadays teachers in all state schools are expected to do so.

There are even bigger differences between those who utilize these approaches to the teaching of reading and those, in recent years, who embraced the idea that most if not all children could learn to read simply through exposure to 'real books' and lots of guided and supported opportunities to engage with them.¹ Though this works well for some children, it does not work for others. For example, although as a small child our son Thomas was far from starved of reading material, or of opportunities to 'catch' reading from adults who read with him, he did not learn to read naturally – as we had grown to expect he would. Interestingly, when he was little, Thomas developed bizarre ideas about the nature of the letters which comprise our typed and written script, that mitigated against his simply 'catching' reading, because they made the complex task of learning to read even more difficult. For example, at one point he thought that there were subtle differences in meaning between 'a's that looked

1 The expression 'real books' refers to books that are not published specifically for use in teaching children to read. Such books might be picture books, story books, or non-fiction books.

different – for example, ‘a’; ‘a’, ‘a’, ‘a’ and ‘a’, though he could not work out what they were. When he eventually realized that what mattered was only the ways in which letters are combined, rather than their form, he took off and quickly became a capable reader.

No matter how long ago you learned to read, the ways in which you did so may have influenced both your attitudes to reading and the ways in which you read. We have both worked in primary schools and thus know something of the excellence that is often attained by teachers, especially in the early years. However, we also know that reading has casualties who leave school at best semi-literate, and many more who leave with reading skills that are less good than they might be. We have known many people who, at least partly as a result of unsupportive, unempathic and uninspiring early teaching, find difficulties with reading when they are students. One of the least helpful things that can happen is when a teacher fails to treat children as individuals who differ from one another in their needs as beginning readers. When this happens a programmatic approach to the reading will be adopted, which will suit some but not all children. It may put others off for life.

Strange though it may seem, in some schools even children who can already read have to go through the whole process of ‘learning to read’. It is almost as if their teachers believe that there is an apprenticeship that must be served in becoming a reader, and a prescribed number of simple books that must be laboriously ‘read’, before a newly qualified reader’s competence can be trusted. Children who learn to read early – whether at home or in school – may thus be held back by teachers who do not recognize their competence, and make them stay with simple books in school, when they are already reading more complex books independently and with good understanding at home. For example, in spite of the fact that our daughter Faith learned to read very quickly, her teacher persisted in sending her home with inappropriate ‘reading books’, even when we pointed out that she was reading more difficult books independently at home. What was worse, Faith insisted on reading her school ‘reading’ books to us in the robotic ‘Jan-et-and-Pe-ter-go-to-the-park. It-is-sun-ny’ way that characterizes many children’s early experience of vocalizing the sounds represented by print. When we asked

her why she read her school books to us like this, she explained that this was how she had to read for 'Miss'.

When, on page 26, we invite you to think about your history as a reader, it may be interesting to try to recall whether, when you were learning to read, emphasis was laid on the ability to recognize individual letters or groups of letters and the sounds they make, or rather on the recognition of whole words. Perhaps the person who taught you to read emphasized the ability to guess at the meanings conveyed by a piece of text, using clues offered by illustrations and what you already knew about the story?

Defining reading	<i>Task 1.1</i>
Write down your own view of what reading is, in a few lines. Bear in mind that there is no right or wrong answer. We're not asking for a well-honed definition; just give a little thought to what you think reading is.	

It is quite likely that you have never given much thought to the processes of reading. However, bringing your ideas about reading into your conscious awareness is a first step towards identifying places where you can improve your skills and hence performance.

So what is reading?

At the most basic level, reading is sometimes thought to consist of translating symbols on a page, or nowadays on a computer screen, into sounds, in what is sometimes referred to as 'barking at print'. Some people would argue that this isn't reading at all. We wouldn't agree. However, it is clear that there is more to reading than merely being able to perform the neat trick of vocalizing the sounds that are represented by the symbols with which we record speech and thought. It also comprises a range of other skills, including those that allow us to decide from context what is intended by words that can have more than one

meaning, and to grasp from a glance at a chunk of print the general meaning intended, without reading each individual word.

Muslim readers will probably remember learning to read the Qu'ran (Koran) from Arabic script, in classes at the mosque. We gather from Muslim friends that, traditionally, Muslim children learn to read the Qu'ran in Arabic when they are small, even though they are considered to be too young for proper comprehension. The first experience many Muslim children have of decoding print thus has nothing at all to do with meaning. As a result, some Muslim children who are learning to read English as a second or third language initially find it difficult to understand that this new kind of reading is about extracting meaning.

Some people would claim that reading is to writing as listening is to speaking – in the sense that whereas writing and speaking are ways in which we communicate information and ideas, reading and listening are ways in which we receive them. We strongly disagree with this idea. Human communication is always a two-way process. Most of the time when we are speaking and writing we will be engaging with things that others have already said or written; and most of the time when we are reading and listening we will be relating the ideas that writers and speakers present to our previous knowledge and experience. In a way this is obvious – after all, how can you possibly understand what you read and hear, if you do not make use of what you already know in doing so? However, it is worth realizing that the more conscious you are of the need to use what you know when you read and listen, and the more actively you try to relate what you read and hear to what you already know, the more efficient you will become as a reader and listener. We address this idea in more detail in Part 4, where we urge you to make the conscious effort always to read actively.

GROWING AS A READER

If you are to make good use of your reading you may have to throw off childlike reading habits that stem, perhaps, from a time when your teachers expected you to read out loud. Many people retain remnants of early reading habits in their reading as adults. For example, when they are reading fiction, the compulsion

to read every word may overpower them, even though, when they are reading non-fiction, they manage to adopt a range of different approaches. For others the difference will go in the opposite direction, so that although they feel almost duty bound to read every word in a non-fiction text, they find it entirely natural to skip merrily past whole chunks of fictional texts, in pursuit of the bones of a storyline.

Surprising though it may seem, some aspects of the teaching of reading that has gone on and may still go on in schools arguably contribute to the development of unhelpful ways of approaching text that can be found in students. Let us illustrate what we are talking about, using an amusing example taken from a book about the assessment of reading by Raban (1982) that you will have noticed at the beginning of Part 2. Can you remember the kind of exercise that she is caricaturing?

Comprehension by Raban (1982)
Task 1.2

Read Raban's passage and try answering her questions. Then try it on a friend along with some extra questions of your own. You might, for example, ask a question about the peus that Toby beck Fred to catch. You might also like to try writing your own passage and questions in the same vein.

Toby was neu years old and had a holl of oun ret. His great-est vilt was a tecture called Fred. Toby lev Fred each yak and gave him holls of welt to pock, he even beck him cutch peus when he could get them from his kult. Fred was mump enough to pell in the gelt of Toby's fing and remp his juges.

Answer these questions in full sentences:

- 1 How old was Toby?
- 2 What did Toby have a holl of?
- 3 What did Toby do to Fred each yak?
- 4 What did Toby give to Fred?
- 5 Why was Fred able to pell in the gelt of Toby's fing?
- 6 What did Fred remp?

(Raban 1982, p.7)

There is no doubt that if you are able to read this book, you are able to read Raban's passage about Toby and his vilt, Fred; or at least you will be able to read it in the sense of saying it aloud. Not only that, however – you will also be able to answer Raban's questions about the passage, even though you do not understand a word of it. So, for example, without knowing what 'oun ret' is, you will be able to work out that Toby had a holl of it, and though you have no idea what Toby's 'fing' is or where it is to be found, you will know that Fred was able to pell in its gelt, because he was 'mump enough'.

The reason you will be able to do all of this is that (whether you are aware of it or not) you have a sophisticated understanding of the way in which our language works, which includes knowledge about the functions of different kinds of words. And so, although you can only guess at what they mean, you know that 'lev' and 'pell' are verbs, and that 'vilt', 'kult' and 'tecture' are nouns; you are likely, also, to be able to guess that while a 'yak' is a measure of time, a 'holl' is a measure that is used in relation to materials such as 'oun ret' (or perhaps 'ret') and 'welt', whatever they are.

Raban's example demonstrates that a general understanding of the ways in which language works can allow us to answer some questions about a piece of text without any knowledge of what it means. You are unlikely ever to be required to answer such questions as a student, though you will have answered screeds of them as a school pupil. However, Raban's example draws attention to dangers that exist when you come across texts that you do not understand, in connection with your work as a student. For example, it demonstrates clearly that knowing something about how language works will often allow you to write about a piece of text as if you understand it, without having the foggiest notion of what it is about.

Many students fall into the dangerous habit of trying, in their work, to persuade their lecturers and tutors that they know and understand things that they do not. This is particularly common among students who are fond of technical language and jargon, and who have formed the deluded idea that its use necessarily conveys an aura of sophistication and the impression that one has mastered one's topic. Such students are likely to believe that writing as if they know and understand the texts they read, even

when they do not, will persuade their lecturers that they are worthy of decent marks; it is as if they do not expect to be caught out. They are putting their trust in the naïve belief that lecturers never ‘really read’ essays. Unfortunately this is not true – at least some lecturers do read essays carefully!

Of course, not all students who write in the kind of ways that we are referring to, do so in order deliberately to deceive their lecturers about what they know. Some do it because they are unwilling to own up to uncertainty about what they read, even when they come across complex and difficult ideas for the first time. A similar unwillingness to own up to ignorance is also encountered in lectures and seminars, when students often fail to ask lecturers to explain things, for fear of looking foolish. The experience of the intellectual and emotional tangles in which many people become involved, in trying to avoid exposing their ignorance, was brilliantly summed up by the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1970):

There is something I don't know
that I am supposed to know.
I don't know *what* it is I am supposed to know,
and yet I am supposed to know,
and I feel I look stupid
if I seem both not to know it
and not know *what* it is I don't know.
Therefore I pretend I know it.

Extract from *Knots* (p.56)

Do you ever pretend to know what you don't know? Or to understand what you don't understand? When you are reading for your coursework or essays, and you come across things that you don't understand, do you ever persuade yourself to believe that all that matters in your essays and exam answers is that you should look as if you have read the right things – or the right kind of things? Or are you brave enough – wise enough – to ask others to help you when you come across passages, or even whole texts, that are beyond your comprehension?

The temptation to feign knowledge and expertise is present even for postgraduate students. One of us recently heard a professor of law talking about a PhD thesis he had examined in

which the candidate referred to some literature about which she seemed to have little understanding. This was a bad mistake on her part, since, to her great bad luck, it was literature in which this professor had a developed interest. By referring to this material in a way that suggested that she had used it in developing her thesis, even though her knowledge of it was slight, she thus laid a trap for herself.

As a student, your job is to learn, even at the expense of admitting that you don't know, and the sooner you learn to admit that at times you don't know and understand, the better. Pretending that you understand what your lecturers are going on about and what you are reading in books, when you do not, is just about the most stupid thing that you can do as a student; while honestly admitting to ignorance, thus opening yourself to the possibility of learning, is probably the most important thing you can learn to do.

Old habits die hard

Perhaps you feel insulted that we have been talking about the need to avoid reading in ways that hark back to the days when you were just beginning to read. You may believe that you are far beyond that kind of thing. However, our experience suggests that many students are stuck in ways of thinking about reading and approaches to reading that belong to their early life, or revert at times to ways of reading in which they engaged as children. For example, they may read every word or feel as if they are somehow cheating if they do not; and at times they may read books from cover to cover (or attempt to do so), rather than reading them in whatever way and in whatever order suits them best. Some people find themselves vocalizing² when they come across words with which they are unfamiliar, or when they are reading material that is complex and difficult to understand.

There is obvious merit in being able to work out how words sound when we first come across them. For example, it can help us to absorb them more readily into both our active and our

² 'Vocalizing' can, of course, happen silently inside our heads or under our breath, when it is often called 'sub-vocalizing'.

passive vocabulary,³ and when necessary it can allow us to look them up in a dictionary. Consider, for example, what happens when you read the following:

He wrote in a style that clouded meaning and seemed to be aimed at obfuscation rather than clarity. Indeed his writing style was so full of idiosagacity that others could rarely understand what he wrote.

How did you cope with that remarkable word 'idiosagacity'? For example, did you read it with an immediate sense of its meaning or did you guess at what it means because you know what 'obfuscatory' means or because you know what both the prefix 'idio' and the word 'sagacious' mean? Did you perhaps guess at its meaning because you understood the previous sentence? Or did you, rather, hover over it, sounding it out syllable by syllable: id-io-sag-a-ci-ty in a desperate attempt to get some sense of what it might be intended to convey? Do you even believe that it is a real word?

Ask yourself whether and when you hear words in your head as you read. Does it happen all the time? Some of the time? Never? Try, as you read texts of various kinds, to be conscious of whether you are reading individual words or groups of words, indeed whether you are conscious of words at all. For some people, the sound of the words that they read is a real and important part of the experience of reading, especially, but not only, when they are reading fiction. For example, a friend recently told us about an autobiographical book she had just read, which demanded to be read with an Irish accent; her claim was that there was no other way in which she could have approached it. In this case, what is in question is not language but dialect and accent, and our friend clearly felt that the most authentic way of approaching the experiences that the author wished to convey was to meet the text in a voice in which he might have spoken it.

3 Our *active vocabulary* is the set of words that we know well enough to allow us to use them in constructing the things we say and write, while our *passive vocabulary* comprises the much larger set of words that we understand when we come across them, but which we are not yet able to use.

In contrast to the experience of those who find that they are conscious of every word when they read fiction, many people find, especially but not exclusively when they are reading fiction, that when they 'get into' the text they seem to be aware of meanings, sounds and pictures, even smells and feelings, without any conscious awareness of the words used to convey them. Some people find something similar happening when they are reading academic texts, especially when the authors have succeeded in communicating clearly.

Sometimes people who usually read without giving any thought to the sound of the words, find themselves reading more slowly and 'subvocalizing' when they are trying to read material that they consider to be of great importance, even if there is nothing particularly difficult about either the content or the vocabulary. Perhaps they think, whether consciously or unconsciously, that by reading like this they will be able to absorb every word – to soak up its importance, understanding and internalizing every bit of meaning.

Reading slowly, listening to the sounds of words as well as to their meanings, can be beneficial – when you are in control of it. For example, it can help you to absorb meaning by focusing attention in a detailed way on what an author is trying to communicate. However, hearing the sounds of words when you read can be a handicap. For example, it can reduce the speed with which you read, which might in turn reduce your ability to absorb meaning. Barnes (1995) points out that '... you stand a better chance of remembering the first half of a sentence if you read quickly enough to reach the second half' (p.53). The point, of course, is that if you read too slowly it is more difficult to get a broad grasp of what is being said, because you will often need to know what the end of a sentence is, before you can fully understand the beginning. Rereading a sentence or paragraph or page rather quickly several times will often be more useful than reading really slowly.

Reading slowly can also lead to lapses in attention and consequent negative effects on the making of meaning, as the reader lapses back into earlier habits and begins simply to decode words, silently barking at print. At its most extreme, this problem can result in the reader merely looking at print, rather than engaging with it at any level.

THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF AS READER

As a first step to improving your skills and disciplines as a reader, we want to invite you to think a little about your reading history. Later at various points we will invite you to reflect on your strengths and weaknesses, and hence on aspects of your reading that can usefully be improved.

How did you become the reader that you are? *Task 1.3*

Think about your career as a reader. Try to remember something about the journey you have made as a reader, from your first tottering steps in trying, as a novice, to understand and decode print, to the way you are today.

Can you remember learning to read? Or do you feel as if you were born with this ability?

Did reading come easily to you, or did you struggle? If you struggled, try to remember something about your experience – how did it feel?

What messages did you receive from your teachers when you were beginning to read? Were they supportive or unsupportive? How do you think their input affected your growth as a reader?

What did you learn about reading, at home? Did the adults with whom you lived as a child encourage you or put you off? Were you surrounded by books that were read?

Did you enjoy reading as a child? What did you read? School books? Comics? Books from the library? Books you were bought? Books you bought yourself?

Can you remember your favourite three books from childhood?

Did you use a torch to read under the bed clothes at night when you were supposed to be asleep?

Can you remember being taught reading skills, after you had learned to read? For example, were you taught to skim and scan text?

How did you get on? Was it easy or difficult to recall your history as a reader? Did you find yourself remembering things you'd forgotten? Some people recall learning to read as one of the most exciting times of their life, while others remember it as a time of misery.

One of us, who was reading by the time she was three, cannot recall anything at all about the process of learning to read. The other can remember the Janet and John⁴ stage vividly, but then his memory of reading jumps forward to the time towards the end of primary school, when every week he and a friend (where are you now Norman Westbrook?) used to walk three miles to the library in Colinton village on the edge of Edinburgh, to continue reading their way through the children's collection.

In trying to recall your history as a reader, did you come across memories about being taught to do anything other than decode words, or perhaps about how to use alphabetical order to look things up in dictionaries and other alphabetical lists? For example, were you taught how to use reference books to find information? Interestingly, there is now some emphasis in primary schools in the UK, on the development of a range of reading skills that may go far beyond those you learned as a child. Among these is skill in assessing books. A couple of years ago, for example, one of us asked our daughter Faith (then aged 9) how she would decide whether a story book was worth taking out of the library. Her answer went like this:

Well first I'd look at the title to see whether it interested me and then at the picture on the front cover because sometimes pictures help but not always because sometimes they just put interesting pictures on to get you interested. Then I'd look at the blurb – you know, on the back cover, to see what it said about the book. After that I'd look inside – at

4 We are referring to a stage, in many of the reading schemes that have been popular in the UK over the last forty or fifty years, where the language used is rather stilted, and characterized by sentences such as 'Janet and John are in the park. They play with a ball. It is red.' Sometimes the characters have different names which, with the advent of political correctness and multicultural awareness, might include names like Mario, Abdul and Sita. One such series of books features the archetypal heroine and hero Janet and John whose adventures take them to exciting places like school and parks, shops and back gardens.

the contents list, to see what the chapters were about and then I'd flick through reading little bits to see if I wanted to read it.⁵

Faith clearly has a developed strategy for deciding which story books to read; she learned it in school. Do you have such a strategy? If you do, how did you come to have it? Did you develop it yourself? Or were you taught it as a child?

Sometimes when people begin to think about their history as readers they discover lost memories about messages they received as beginning readers – messages that might well be influencing their reading as adult students. For example, someone who has difficulties in getting through reading might recall being told they weren't trying hard enough when, as a child, they were slower than their friends. The devastation that might be caused to a child by being labelled as a 'slow reader' can be directly experienced simply by reading aloud Allan Ahlberg's wonderful poem *Slow Reader* (1984). Please try it.

Slow Reader

I - am - in - the - slow
 read - ers - group - my - broth
 er - is - in - the - foot
 ball - team - my - sis - ter
 is - a - ser - ver - my
 lit - tle - broth - er - was
 a wise - man - in - the
 in - fants - Christ - mas - play
 I - am - in - the - slow
 read - ers - group - that - is
 all - I - am - in - I
 hate - it.

Were you a slow reader? Or were you, like one of us, a child who had a reading age of 14 when she was 7?

5 When, recently, we asked how she would assess a book that wasn't a story book, she said, 'Do you mean an information book?' and proceeded to talk, among other things, in terms of skimming chunks and of scanning for particular words in which she is interested; we haven't yet discovered whether she was taught this or caught it from us.

What are you like as a reader?

Now that you've thought a little about your history as a reader, take some time to think about yourself as a reader now – for example, about the range of material you read, when you read, and the different ways in which you read. Notice that we are not asking you to focus specifically on academic reading at the moment – we shall come to that in Part 2.

What are you like as a reader?

Task 1.4

Do you enjoy reading? Or is it a chore? Do you sometimes enjoy it and sometimes hate it? What's the difference between reading that you like, and reading that you don't like?

If you don't enjoy reading, why don't you enjoy it?

Do you think you're a good reader? If so, make a list of your strengths. On the other hand, if you think you aren't a good reader, try to list the problems you have. (Then try listing your strengths as a reader, because if you are managing to read this, you must have some.)

Do you read for pleasure? Or do you only read in connection with your coursework?

If you read for pleasure, what do you read? (Novels? Non-fiction books? Magazines? websites?).

If you don't read for pleasure, why don't you? Is it that you don't enjoy reading? Or do you find it difficult? Is it hard to find the time?

What do you find easiest to read? What do you find most difficult to read? What is the difference between things you find easy to read and those you find difficult?

Do you ever have several books 'on the go' at the same time? If so, why? Is it because it allows you to dot from one to the other, thus maintaining some level of interest in a number of different topics at the same time?

Do you talk to other people about what you read? To what extent is your choice of reading material influenced by others?

Which books do you manage to finish reading? And which do you never get through, no matter how hard you try? Do books that you finish and books that you abandon part way through demand to be read in different ways?

When you don't finish reading a book do you feel guilty? If not, why not? If yes, why yes?

We all differ from one another in the things we read, the ways we read, the time we give to reading and the extent to which we share our reading with others. For some people reading is little more than a skill that they employ when necessary. For others it is almost a substitute for social life, in which the characters in fictional books are like friends who have come to stay. This is particularly common for those who reread a favourite book many times. How big a part of your life do the characters that inhabit fictional books become for you? And how real do the characters that inhabit academic books – the theories and arguments and hypotheses they contain – become for you?

Some people would never dream of discussing the things they read with friends while, for others, reading is very much a social activity. One of our friends frequently manages, even in short conversations, to let us know what she is reading at the moment, in the same way that other people might talk about the latest movie they have seen. Another friend is part of a reading group, the members of which meet regularly to discuss books (usually, but not exclusively, novels) that they have jointly decided to read. Members of such groups enjoy the opportunity to explore ideas, images and emotions evoked by the books they read, thus enriching their understanding of those books and allowing them to develop their critical faculties as they share their views and opinions. You might like to consider setting up such a group as part of your study programme. This might seem like a naff idea – after all, students aren't meant to sit round discussing work; they're supposed to sit around talking about music and sex and movies and travelling – anything but work. On the other hand, the idea of a few pals sitting round once a fortnight, or once a month, with a bottle of wine and a book, or even an article, that you have all agreed to read and discuss, doesn't seem totally unattractive to us. We think that sharing reading with friends

can be really helpful, and in Part 9 we talk about some other ways in which you might do so.

How do you read?

Let's now look more closely at some aspects of your reading, remembering that for the moment we do not want you to focus specifically on academic reading. We hope that by consciously focusing on your reading habits – how, where and when you read – you might be in a better position to change your reading for the better. Your current approaches to reading may seem inefficient once you think carefully about them.

How do you read?

Task 1.5

Do you always read in the same way? Or do you employ different strategies, depending on what you are reading?

For example, do you read differently when you are reading fiction than when you are reading non-fiction?

Do you read books in the same way as you read magazines or newspapers?

Does the way you read books depend on what you hope to get from them?

Do you always read novels from beginning to end? Do you sometimes skip back to check details about the plot and characters?

What else do you do while you are reading? For example, do you listen to music? If you do, are you conscious of the results of doing so? Does accompanying noise prevent your mind wandering? Or is it an avoidable distraction?

This task is important and we hope you may come back to it several times over the course of a week or two, noticing how you are reading at different times, in relation to different kinds of material.

What do you read and why?

We are surrounded by a sea of print, much of which we read. We'd like you now to think about what you read, what you like to read and what you would like to read. Think also about your reasons for reading different kinds of material. In doing so you might find the following questions useful:

What do you read and why?	Task 1.6
<p>What do you read? Magazines? Books? Newspapers? Websites? Anything in print that comes within striking distance when you have more than a minute to spare?</p> <p>Are you addicted to reading? Do you read the backs of cereal packets; posters at railway stations; those pamphlets about things that you would rather not imagine, that live in the display racks in GPs' waiting rooms? Notes on other people's noticeboards?</p> <p>Can you get on a train or plane, without something to read?</p> <p>Do you take piles of books on holiday with you? If so, what kind of books do you take, and why?</p> <p>Do you get withdrawal symptoms if you don't read a newspaper for a week?</p> <p>Are there things you would like to read that you haven't read? If there are, think about why you would like to read them and try to work out why you haven't.</p> <p>Why do you read? Do you have lots of different reasons for reading? Do you ever read without a purpose in mind? Why?</p>	

At different times your aim in reading may be enjoyment, the acquisition of information or new viewpoints, passing time, or some combination of these. Dieters and people who want to reduce their alcohol consumption are often asked to keep a record of the food they eat or of the alcohol they drink, as a way of making them more conscious of their eating and drinking. Such records can be surprising if kept honestly. If you were to keep

a diary of everything you read, you would probably be equally surprised.

Keep a reading diary

Task 1.7

Try to keep a diary of everything you read for a week and the amount of time you spend doing so (or perhaps just for a day or two, if a week would be too daunting or time consuming). You will find this quite a major task, because when we say everything, we mean *everything* – from phone books to wine labels, from email messages to the headlines in newspapers, from CD notes to the packets of oven ready meals, and from the abstracts (or even full articles) in academic journals, to websites and academic books.

Are you surprised by the amount of time you spend reading each week and by the diversity of the material you read? A reading diary should help you to pinpoint the areas that are your current priorities as a reader, if you didn't already know this.