

Learning to learn

A seminar series on the strategies behind effective learning.

How to Read

...for understanding

Myths about reading

People absorb knowledge by reading sentences. This is why you read and re-read passages, hoping that this process will somehow lead to understanding.

Highlighting text while reading will help you to remember it.

Speed reading helps you to learn more quickly. Reading (a bit) faster is possible but will do little to help improve understanding.

What are you reading for?

Knowing why you are reading changes how you read.

There is a difference between reading for *understanding* and reading for *information*.

Learning something requires mental effort; it's uncomfortable. Reading, as part of learning, should also be challenging.

Aim to read work that is slightly above your level so that you keep pushing yourself towards better understanding.

Active vs passive reading

Reading (anything other than for entertainment) is an attempt to ask the book questions (and to answer them to the best of your ability).

Active reading is a way of engaging in a conversation with an author who is better informed than you are with respect to the topic of interest. Active reading is *work*.

Passive reading *cannot* lead to understanding, only to the acquisition of facts. **Anything easily digested is reading for information.**

Levels of reading

The next 4 slides will go into each level in more detail.

1. *Elementary*: If you're reading this, you're doing elementary reading.
2. *Inspectional*: Skimming and superficial reading.
3. *Analytical*: "Doing the work" of reading.
4. *Syntopical*: Comparing and contrasting across several books.

Levels of reading: Elementary reading

Elementary reading is the process of converting symbols on a page into sounds that are combined to form words and sentences.

For the purposes of this module, we assume that everyone is proficient in elementary reading.

Levels of reading: Inspectional reading

Inspectional reading is the attempt to determine if the book is worth the time necessary to understand it.

Systematic skimming: A quick look through the book, 1) preface, 2) table of contents, 3) index, 4) inside jacket.

Maybe read a couple of paragraphs. Does the book deserve more time? If *Yes*, move on to the next level.

Superficial reading: Read the whole book quickly. Don't look things up. Don't stop to consider the argument. A superficial reading may be enough to give you the information you need. But if you want to really *understand* the book, you need to move to the next level.

Levels of reading: Analytical reading

1. Classify the book according to *kind* and *subject*.
2. Briefly state what the whole book is about.
3. Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and outline these parts as you have outlined the whole.
4. Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.

After engaging in this process you are in a position to have an *informed opinion* of the book. However, this is not the same as *developing expertise*.

Levels of reading: Syntopical reading

Analysing several books on the same topic and comparing and contrasting between them is the first step towards developing expertise.

1. Find the most relevant passages from each book. This requires an inspectional reading of all the relevant books you've selected.
2. Reframe each authors' arguments in your own words. This gives you a unified vocabulary with which to explore the topic.
3. Identify the questions you want to answer (the authors of each book may have answered different questions).
4. Defining the issues that emerge when a question has multiple answers helps to identify different perspectives.
5. Analysing the discussion between different answers to your question is what enables you to have an informed opinion.

Reading academic journal articles

Be prepared to make notes, read it multiple times, and in a different order to how it's presented.

Start with the introduction and identify the main question.

Summarise the background in a few sentences.

Describe how the authors are going to answer specific questions to get an overview of the methods.

Read the results alongside the main question, as well as the specific questions.

Read the Conclusion, then the Discussion.

Paper or digital formats?

Coming back to *why* you're reading might help you to make a decision here.

You may find it more useful to use print formats when your aim is to deeply engage with the text. You're more likely to make notes and markup the text.

Reading on screen changes the way you read, possibly because of the difficulty in navigating digital texts.

Reading on screen can be more distracting.

However, digital formats enable easier searching and the exporting of notes to other apps.

Trusting what you've read

You can find the “answer” to almost any question on the internet, and as we increasingly turn to digital and online sources for our learning, we need to be more astute than ever when it comes to establishing credibility of our sources.

Here is a useful mnemonic:

Currency: how recent is the information?

Reliability: are sources included?

Authority: who is the author?

Purpose: is this fact or opinion?

A far more detailed discussion around establishing credibility in what you're reading can be found in Howard Rheingold's [*Crap detection 101*](#).

Where should you read?

This depends entirely on what you are reading.

Reading for entertainment or information can be done anywhere, preferably somewhere comfortable (think couch, or garden).

Reading for understanding is deeply engaging, active, and usually involves marking up the text and other forms of note-taking. This should be done at a desk or at least some kind of appropriate workspace.

How to read more

Get into the habit of reading. Start by *setting aside* time to read rather than *waiting until* you have time to read.*

Reading faster is not the same as understanding more. The best way to read faster is to read more. To get better at the skill of reading well.

Quit reading books you're not enjoying.

Carry a book with you at all times.

Keep your phone in airplane mode.**

* See the module on *Creating good habits*.

** See the module on *How to focus and avoid distraction*.

Tips for reading more effectively

If your goal is to “cover content”, you’re reading for information. This can be done quickly.

Reading for *understanding* (i.e. learning) is active, challenging, and demands your full attention. It is *work*.

Reading for understanding is likely to include a combination of reading *and writing*.

Reading apps

Book summary apps

- Blinkist, 12min, ABS, StoryShots

“Read it later” apps

- Pocket, Instapaper

Ebook readers

- Kindle, MoonReader, many others

Audiobooks

- Audible, Google Play Books

Resources

Adler, M. (1972). How to read a book: The classic guide to intelligent reading.

Kleon, A. (2019). [How to read more](#). Austin Kleon blog.

Mewburn, I. (2019). [Beware the couch. Reflections on academic reading](#). The Thesis Whisperer blog.

Newport, C. (). How to be a straight-A student.

Parrish, S. (n.d.) [How to be a demanding reader](#). Farnum Street blog.

Parrish, S. (n.d.) [How to read a book](#). Farnum Street blog.

Rheingold, H. (2009). [Crap detection 101](#). SFGate.

Young, S. (2015). [I was wrong about speed reading. Here are the facts](#). Scott Young blog.

Moving forward...

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Next topic: **How to Write**