**Top of Form**

**Bottom of Form**

**Media and Culture: Academic Skills and Research**

Reading strategies

Reading for study does not involve just starting with the first sentence and continuing until the last. Different texts and different genres call for different reading methods that are either more or less intensive. Core texts – for an exam, an assignment or your own research – require the most comprehensive and in-depth reading strategy. It consists of three reading methods or phases, which are explained below: exploratory reading, reading comprehension and critical reading. Using exploratory reading, you try to form an initial impression of the idea and the structure of the text. That way, in the second phase – reading comprehension – you will already have a reasonable picture of what you can expect. The third phase involves critical reading, that is analysing the text.

**Exploratory Reading**

In the exploratory reading of a book or article, you systematically read specific parts of the text. Based on this, you form an idea of the specific subject (including delineation by time and place), the question and the main idea. Exploratory reading consists of the following elements.

1. *Read the title, the introduction and the conclusion.*

The title already contains an important indication of the main idea, certainly in the usually specifying subtitle, such as for example ‘Media and youth culture in 1960s Britain’. The introduction – whether or not indicated as such with a paragraph heading – usually contains: a catchy opening, the demarcation of the subject, a reflection on previously conducted research or formulation of a theory on this subject, and – explicitly or not – the questions that this text will answer. Usually there are also indications about the relevance of the main idea. In many cases the question is not formulated explicitly, but in principle can be deduced from the introduction. That also applies to descriptive texts which, unlike explicitly arguing texts, do not appear to have any questions, but which of course always have some intended purpose with the description. In the conclusion, at the end of the book or article, you often find a concise description of the subject and the question, but especially a review of the developed main idea.

Underline or highlight sentences and passages that reflect the topic, the question or the main idea of the text.

1. *Next, read the paragraph headings and any abstracts, and with a book also the jacket text and table of contents.*

The paragraph headings and table of contents give an idea of the sub-topics and structure of the text. The jacket text offers an attractive summary of the subject and the main thesis of the study. Sometimes, a separate summary is included in the book; some articles start or end with an *abstract*.

1. *Formulate the topic, the question and the main idea.*

Based on what you have read, try to formulate in three sentences what you believe is the topic, the question and the main idea of the text.

1. *Determine genre and intended audience*

Is the text primary or secondary, essayistic or academic, descriptive or argumentative? Although in practice texts are rarely entirely descriptive or argumentative, try to characterise the text. Is it a research report, a description of a phenomenon, a programmatic overview, an argument or another academic type of text? What is the apparent purpose of the text: to inform, persuade, instruct, critique? Also ask yourself who is the intended audience of the text. A general audience, the interested lay person, fellow professionals, academic specialists?

1. *Scan the middle section of the text and read a paragraph here and there.*

Try to form an idea of text structure, the subtopics and the argumentation structure. What does the connection between the different chapters and paragraphs appear to be? How do the subtopics relate to the main idea? Is there an argumentation structure to discover at first glance?

1. *Activate your prior knowledge, jot down questions and motivate yourself*

Finally, consider what you know about the subject so far. What do you expect this text to add to this? Which questions has the reading raised in your mind so far? What are you curious about? Jot this down.

**Reading comprehension**

When you want to fully understand and study a text, an exploratory reading will not suffice. You will need to carefully examine the text, sentence by sentence. Reading comprehension means that you fully understand *each* part of the text, each step, and can reproduce it in your own words. The previously mentioned exploratory reading is certainly necessary at the beginning of your study to ensure that you quickly get to the essence of the text during reading comprehension. Incidentally, you will get faster and better at exploratory reading as you progress in your studies and the more you practise.

In the reading comprehension phase, you read the text from sentence to sentence. Pay attention to the following points:

1. *Establish the main idea per section and per paragraph.*

A good text is structured in sections, each of which covers a subtopic of the main topic. In turn, a good section is structured in paragraphs, each of which includes a secondary idea. Together they form the overarching main idea and argumentation structure of the text. To read a text thoroughly, you do not have to do anything more – but also nothing less – than to try to summarise its essence for yourself per section and per paragraph, and to understand the logical relationship with the preceding and the following.

For the essence of sections you need to be extra attuned to the opening and final paragraphs: often the core of the section is most explicitly described there. For the essence of paragraphs, most of all you need to look for the core sentence, which is referred to as the topical sentence of the paragraph. Underline or highlight these topical sentences.

The connections between individual paragraphs and sentences can be found in sentences with typical signal words such as:

* also, as well, moreover, in addition, not alone, except, secondly, further (coordination, list)
* but, however, nevertheless, still, despite, then again, unlike, as opposed to (contrast)
* for example, like this, such as, including (example, explanation)
* initially, first, before, after, subsequently, next, when (chronology)
* owing to, as, because, since, after all, consequently, as a result, therefore, thus, lest, and so (cause/effect, reason)
* in short, in other words, basically (summary), for that, to that end, in order to, by, by means of, through, with that (means).

Incidentally, not every section and every paragraph is ‘exemplary’ in structure. Not all paragraphs form a clear group around a topical sentence, and paragraphs likewise do not always guarantee sharply defined components. Although sometimes this indicates the poor quality of the text, it does necessarily have to be the case.

Postpone forming your opinion during this reading phase. Try to focus mainly on grasping the author’s perspective. What does the author want to say in this paragraph? How does it connect to the main idea? You do not decide whether you find the argumentation convincing until the critical reading phase. Your judgement will be more solid when you have first determined exactly what the author actually wants to say.

Highlight key words, key sentences and possibly key passages in a text but do not highlight more than approximately 10 percent of the text. Make notes about the structure, the topics and the arguments, too.

1. *Look up unfamiliar words and figure out key sentences that are hard to understand.*

It is not necessary per se to look up *every single* word you do not know in a dictionary, just the unfamiliar words that relate to the essence of the text, and the meaning of which you are unable to derive from the context. You will need to re-read and figure out any complex or abstract sentences that you do not immediately understand but suspect have something to do with the essence. If you get stuck, mark them and maybe ask a fellow student or lecturer what the author might have been trying to say.

1. *Activate your prior knowledge, and look up additional knowledge if necessary.*

Your comprehension of a text and how quickly you achieve it depends greatly on your prior knowledge of the subject, the context and possibly the existing academic debate about it. Try to activate your prior knowledge; this makes reading more interesting and more meaningful.

When you start your studies, there are times when you must resign yourself to the fact that you are unable to comprehend a text in full because you still lack the necessary background information. Sometimes, however, you must ascertain that you lack important background knowledge. This could be knowledge from previous courses, but it could also be general knowledge. In such cases, consult an encyclopaedia, a manual, an old reader or an online source to fill in the gaps in your knowledge, or to refresh your memory.

1. *Formulate an answer to your own questions, and refer to your notes.*

Determine whether the questions that you formulated during the exploratory reading phase can now be answered. Re-read your notes, re-read the passages that you marked and compare these with the three sentences that you had formulated after the exploratory reading phase. Adapt these sentences as needed and try to capture the essence of the text in *one* paragraph at the most.

Based on this reading strategy, you can then [write a well-structured and informative summary](https://avmec.wp.hum.uu.nl/schrijven/academische-samenvattingen/).

**Critical reading**

Critical reading focuses on forming an opinion as opposed to being able to reproduce the content and argumentation. The point now is whether the text is, in your opinion, a convincing and important contribution to an academic or social debate. In order to be able to make this kind of judgement, you must be fully prepared. Opinions are cheap; arguments to substantiate are not.

In principle there are two types of text-critical arguments: internal (text-immanent) and external (extratextual). ‘Internal’ involves exposing inconsistencies and flaws in the text itself. These can consist of illogical lines of reasoning, unwarranted connections, unwarranted equations or contradictions. It may also be positive assertions without proof or concrete examples, or quotes that have been taken out of context. It can even be a matter of downright errors, for example in the chronology used, but that already edges into the second type of argument.

For the second type of arguments – external – as reader you must possess extra knowledge. Here it is about the judgement of whether a text gives a correct representation of things, and for that you need to have knowledge outside of the text itself. In other words, critical reading calls on external knowledge, both knowledge that you already have at your disposal and therefore must activate, as well as knowledge that you lack – and which you therefore must get from somewhere. In the course of reading, you will undoubtedly ask yourself: ‘Is that right? Is this correct?’ In that case there is only one solution: increase your knowledge by consulting other sources.

Incidentally, it is good to realise that not every external argument is a question of whether or not it is an accurate reflection of facts. Arguments can be distinguished into *factual arguments,* which are based on facts or empirical data, and *normative arguments,* which are based on an idea of what is good or bad. A negative or positive opinion about, for example, an article about file sharing online can be substantiated with factual arguments about the relationship between CD sales and mp3 downloads, but also with normative arguments about when it is appropriate to use the word theft.

The following questions can help you determine your judgement on a text, and which additional knowledge you should collect:

1. *Questions about the positioning of the text*

* Who is the author? Doe he or she qualify as a national or international expert? Has the author published in this area before?
* Who was the publisher, and in which journal, in which collection did the text appear? Is this a prestigious publication? Who is the intended audience of the text? What does that say about the reliability?
* From which year is the text? What does that say about the historical context and how does this influence the perspective? How can this be translated to the present-day situation/debate?
* Does the text cover a factual or a controversial subject? What is the possible controversy about?
* Have reviews of this text been published? What is the gist of these?

1. *Questions about persuasiveness*

* Are there proper footnotes and bibliography? Which sources does the author use: recent research, multiple sources or just one? What do the sources say about the author’s position in the academic field?
* In the case of a research report, is the method used clearly explained? Is the data selection adequate for the question? Are the interpretations of the data plausible, or are others conceivable?
* Does the author present all possible points of view? Does the author talk to others who have written about this subject? What stance does the author take?
* What is the author’s viewpoint or position? Is this explicitly stated? Is it sufficiently substantiated? Are there hidden agendas or interests?
* Are the factual arguments actually based on facts, or at least plausible? Are the normative arguments sufficiently substantiated? Are sufficient counter-arguments discussed and are these sufficiently refuted? Are there unaddressed arguments or counter-arguments to be made?
* Does the final conclusion sufficiently follow from the argumentation and does it fulfil the promises in the introduction?

1. *Questions about prior knowledge*

* What does the text add to other publications you have read on this subject?
* Does the author give an accurate representation of these publications and the added value of their own text?

On the basis of this you can now make your own critical judgement. Incidentally, ‘critical’ does not automatically mean that you are negative and unfavourably disposed. This is a reading attitude in which you never blithely accept anything in advance or without context. Write down your judgement, not only for the sake of an assignment, final paper, exam or tutorial, but also simply to retain your knowledge and judgement. Place the text in the context of the relevant debate, discuss strong and weak aspects of the text, and substantiate your judgement with arguments: internal and external, factual and normative.