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# Don't try to RUN before you can walk: reading made easy

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**S**o, you are not going to read this article because, after all, you know you can read. Fine, but reading is an activity that precedes writing, perhaps of a report, or an essay, or — let us think big — a dissertation or a PhD. Getting into the habit of using that reading constructively will help you now, whether you are an undergraduate or a preregistration trainee — and in the future. As a pharmacist you will be reading as part of your continuing professional development — how else can you keep up to date with what is happening, whether in terms of evidence-based medicine or policy relating to the way the health service is to be delivered, or your professional body is structured? At some time, too, you may decide to study for a postgraduate qualification and practising some reading skills now could help you.

So, in this article I will be looking at:

- Problems with reading
- Two strategies for note-taking from reading
- Reading for meaning

## Problems with reading

It does seem rather negative to start here but making reading “easy” is important. Two common problems are time and the text.

There are speed reading courses if you feel that you need help here, but you cannot avoid the fact that reading can be time consuming. It is common for an article, report or book to be read and re-read. Do not worry about that; sometimes a quick scan enables you to see the structure and argument so that a slower and deeper reading enables you to follow the path more easily. Misreading is easy, subsequent readings allow both for initial errors of misreading to be redressed and for developing understanding of the subject matter.

Sometimes the problem lies with the way the text is presented. To help you to understand what I mean (and to help you develop strategies to deal with this) take two different pieces of writing, say, a novel and a scientific report. Using two columns, compare and contrast the two texts. Look at, for example:

- Use of headings and sub-headings
- Punctuation
- Format, such as paragraphs
- Style of writing, eg, descriptive, analytical, personal

With that done — your list should be quite long — decide which are the features that appeal to you and make your reading easier. Now, when you are reading a piece of text that you find difficult, can

you — mentally or physically — add in one or more of those devices that you find make reading pleasurable? For example, adding in sub-headings to unbroken text. If you find yourself disagreeing with the writer, ask yourself why, since that sometimes can be helpful too.

## Making notes from reading

**T**here are two strategies to making notes from reading. The first is called global reading. This means reading a chunk of manageable text (you need to decide what is manageable in the context of what you are reading but it is unlikely to be pages and pages). For each manageable chunk, write down, using your own words, a one-sentence summary.

The second strategy is rather more sophisticated, providing more detailed information and increasing the practice of “using your own words”. Take a sheet of paper and divide it so that the right hand side column consists of two-thirds of the page and the left-hand side is one-third. Using the right hand side, for each manageable chunk note down key points. Again use your own words, although sometimes it is helpful to use the same headings as the author. When you have finished the chapter or report, close your source. Now, using the information you have written down, identify the various key points in the left-hand column. Once that is done, you can use highlighter pens as you like to link up, note particular themes or whatever. If you are a mind mapper, then mind map these key points, perhaps

linking them up to other reading. This is particularly helpful if you are writing a dissertation or thesis where you will be expected to compare, contrast and summarise the literature in the topic area.

Useful quotations can also be logged down (right-hand column) but remember to be sure to note the exact page number and the exact words. The main objective is to find your own words for expressing what it is the author is saying.

### Reading for meaning

There are two strands to reading for meaning. The first, fitting together reading, follows on from the notes you have been taking. Here you are trying to:

- ▶ Synthesise what you are reading, in particular thinking about how it connects to the same topic but with other authors

- ▶ Connect the reading to other topics
- ▶ Consider how the reading relates to the specific assignment you have in mind

The second strand is analytic reading. In this type of reading you need to be asking yourself:

- ▶ What is the author's perspective on this particular topic?
- ▶ How does this relate to other views on the topic?
- ▶ What are the central arguments?
- ▶ What evidence is produced to support these?
- ▶ How balanced or biased are the views?

You will have realised by now that the central concern of this article is to be sure that you understand what you are reading. Putting it into your own words helps this process.

One final point. Do be sure that you write on your notes the following information:

- ▶ Name of author(s)
- ▶ Date of publication
- ▶ Book/journal/article title
- ▶ Page number(s)
- ▶ Publisher (town and name)
- ▶ Where you found that source (include library name and reference numbers)

### Further reading

I am indebted to a book on 'Writing at University' by Phyllis Crème and Mary Lea for the ideas in this article. Published by the Open University Press in 1997 (there is a more recent edition) the book can be recommended as a straightforward guide to all aspects of writing. ✎