Alternative Format: Academic Reading Toolkit

Landing Page

Welcome and thank you for accessing this toolkit which has been designed to help support you with your academic skills development during your time at Edge Hill. Click 'Get Started' to start the toolkit from the beginning or alternatively select the most relevant heading(s), from the contents below. We recommend completing the sections in order, but you are welcome to work through this toolkit in the way that suits you best.

Accessibility

Our commitment to accessibility

As an Edge Hill student you are part of an incredibly diverse learning community. As part of our ongoing commitment to ensure an equitable and inclusive learning experience for all students, we have placed accessibility at the heart of UniSkills support, which enables all students to participate.

Alternative Formats

This is an alternative format for the Academic Reading toolkit.

Welcome from UniSkills

"Hello, we are the Student Engagement team – otherwise known as UniSkills! We are the people you'll meet (in real life and online) through various support channels, as we help you develop your academic skills while studying at Edge Hill University. Later in the toolkit you will have the opportunity to explore our wider support, but this is your chance to find out more about the team"

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Access the video below to hear more about UniSkills and how to use this toolkit from our friendly Student Advisor. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a **Word version** or **PDF version**.

How this toolkit can help

This toolkit is designed to support you to recognise that academic reading is an integral part of being a successful student. It will offer suggestions and strategies to develop your confidence and help you get the most out of your academic reading.

Access this short video**,** featuring one of your friendly academic skills advisors, who will tell you more about why academic writing is important. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a **Word version** or **PDF** version.

Top tip: Already received some assignment feedback or wish to jump to a specific word or phrase within this toolkit? You can click on the magnifying glass in the top left-hand corner of the navigation panel to access a search box, search for key terms and learn more about that skill. Depending on the device you are using to access the toolkit, and whether you are in portrait or landscape mode, you might need to click on the 3 lines '≡' in the top left-hand corner of your device to access this search feature.

Toolkit objectives:

This toolkit will:

- Support you to identify what academic texts are, and recognise how they differ from other sources
- Help you to identify when to read, and how to read with purpose
- Offer strategies for effective academic reading and organising your sources
- Highlight how you can access further help and support from the UniSkills team

Completing this toolkit also supports the following graduate attributes:

- Literacy
- Critical Thinking
- Planning and Organisation

What is academic reading?

At university you will be expected to read widely using a range of good quality, recent and relevant academic texts. So, what are academic texts?

Academic texts

Academic texts are written by professionals or experts in a field, and are primarily for scholarly and research purposes. They tend to be formal in tone and are based on facts and evidence. They differ from non-academic texts which are informal and often subjective. Non-academic texts are often things that we associate with reading for pleasure, such as novels, magazines, and blogs.

Some examples of academic texts include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Textbooks
- Published conference papers

Peer-reviewed journal articles and textbooks are two of the most common sources of academic literature, so it is worth considering the differences in what they can offer.

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Peer-reviewed journal articles usually offer the most recent research as they can be published much faster than textbooks. However, it is important to remember they are written by authors with specialist subject knowledge, and that they are writing for an audience of other experts in that field.

Do not worry if the idea of reading a journal article initially feels daunting, especially if you are new to that topic. Once you become more familiar with the subject area, and the style of writing, journal articles will feel less intimidating!

Textbooks

Textbooks can usually offer a more accessible way to understand a topic or subject area. Your tutor will have provided a list of essential and recommended texts in your [reading list](#), so these can be a great place to start.

Textbooks are especially useful for reading about topics that are particularly influential in a specific area, or where information does not change rapidly. For example:

- Theories

- Policies
- Laws and statutes
- Equations and formulas
- Religion

Top Tip: If a topic is new or complex, you can familiarise yourself with that subject by accessing information through textbooks first, before moving on to any recent research published in that area by reading peer-reviewed academic journals.

Grey literature

Grey literature refers to information that is either unpublished, or has been published informally. It may be produced by organisations such as professional bodies, companies, corporations, and government agencies.

Grey literature can be a valuable resource as it can offer up-to-date findings, legislation, or statistical information. However, it varies hugely in quality so you will need to critically assess the relevance, currency, and accuracy of the information you find.

For more information on how to critically assess sources check out the Finding Academic Information area of the UniSkills webpages.

Some examples of academic texts include peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, and published conference papers.

Some examples of grey literature include statistical reports, government reports, and professional body guidelines.

Some examples of non-academic texts include blog posts, emails, and fiction books.

Knowing when to read

As a student, there are a range of different times that you will need to actively read. For example, pre-reading for lectures, preparation for seminars, and reading to ensure that your assignments are evidence-based. Remember that it is also important to make time to read for pleasure.

The following sections explain why these different types of reading are all important.

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Pre-reading for lectures:

You may want to prepare in advance for your lectures by reading around the topic. Sometimes your tutors will include suggested texts or sources in your module handbook that can help develop your knowledge and understanding of a topic or theme. Pre-reading is usually not compulsory, however it can help you to understand a topic in more depth, which in turn can increase your engagement in the lecture. Importantly, if you do engage in pre-reading you are not expected to read everything that is suggested!

Tips:

- Select one or two sources on a topic that seem interesting to you
- You might just read the abstract and conclusion of a journal article, or skim a chapter
- Whether you read in-depth, or simply skim a section of text, any additional reading on a topic will help to develop your understanding

Seminar preparation:

Seminars are more informal ways of learning than lectures, and can offer opportunities to engage in discussions on topics that have already been covered in the lecture. Sometimes seminars occur in advance of the lectures, which enables you to learn more on a theme or topic before it is formally taught. Any expectations about reading for seminars will be clearly laid out in your module handbook, or on Learning Edge (Blackboard). Reading in advance of attending your seminar is a great way to help yourself feel prepared, and to start building more knowledge on a topic.

To complete assignments:

Whatever format your assessments come in, you will need to read around the topic to ensure that you can demonstrate a depth and breadth of knowledge on the subject. At university anything you write should be evidence-based, and this knowledge comes from the reading you do. By reading widely on a topic you will begin to identify themes that emerge, and can use these to plan your assignment. Remember that you are reading to inform your writing, so it is important to ensure that you allow yourself enough time to read. Good academic writing will require you to do a lot of reading! A great starting point is to access your [reading list](#) and explore some of the resources your tutors recommend.

For yourself:

Reading for yourself is important too. Whether you enjoy fiction to help you wind down, have a specific niche interest that keeps you engaged, or like to delve into new non-fiction topics,

remembering to make time to read for pleasure is also essential! Whether you prefer physical books, audio books or eBooks, we have a range of options for you to browse. Check out our [Reading for Pleasure](#) collection of physical books based in Catalyst. All students and staff can also access a collection of eBooks, audiobooks and magazines 24/7 through a digital library custom collection via the [Libby app](#).

Pre-reading recap:

There are multiple benefits to pre-reading for lectures and seminars, including helping you to engage more with a range of topics, expand your knowledge, and feel more prepared. Many pre-reading sources can be accessed digitally, so you will not necessarily spend more time in the library. However, there are lots of great spaces in Catalyst to sit and read as well as study! You will never be expected to buy sources for pre-reading. Tutors often provide articles or links to sources for you on Learning Edge (Blackboard), or you may be directed to read from texts on your reading list which will always be accessible either online or in hard copy.

Reading to complete assignments recap:

Reading widely to complete your assignments can help to ensure that your writing is evidence-based and can support you to meet your learning outcomes. You will also need to access a range of different sources to ensure good depth and breadth of knowledge on a topic. It is important to ensure that you have plenty of time to read. If you leave it until the last minute, you will not have time to process what you have read, meaning it is less likely that you will be able to make connections between different ideas, arguments, and concepts.

Reading for pleasure recap:

If you enjoy reading, this can also be a great way to wind down. Focus on finding texts on topics that are unrelated to your area of study, so that you feel like you are having a break from study. Reading for pleasure can be done in any genre, style, or format. Whether you prefer fiction or non-fiction, you can access a vast range of physical books, eBooks, magazines, and audiobooks either in Catalyst or through the Libby app.

Why should you read?

"The More that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." – Dr Seuss, I Can Read With My Eyes Shut

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Traditionally students were said to be 'reading' for a degree, which acknowledges the substantial amount of reading that academic qualifications require! To get the most out of your academic reading, try to consider the purpose of each text.

Reading with purpose

There can be many different reasons for reading, so before you engage with a particular text it is worth asking yourself "Why am I reading this?". Some reasons might include:

- Expanding your knowledge on a topic
- Answering a specific assignment question
- Understanding how policies or legislation apply to your practice
- Evaluating a range of theories relating to your subject area
- Becoming familiar with the conventions of academic writing
- Ensuring your discussion and reasoning is always evidence-based

Prompting yourself in this way can help you to identify why you are reading, which can influence the way in which you engage with each text, enabling you to get the most out of your academic reading.

Levelness

Levelness refers to the year of study at which you are being assessed, and each subsequent level requires gradually more depth and breadth of knowledge to be demonstrated. Therefore it is important to ensure that the reading you do is appropriate for the level of study you are undertaking. There will be a much greater expectation around volume and rigour of sources required at postgraduate level, compared to what is expected in your first year of university study where the idea of academic reading may be new to you.

Check out the different levels of study to find out what you are expected to be able to demonstrate at each level, and to help you assess the depth and breadth of academic reading needed to meet these requirements.

Level 4 (1st year of undergraduate study)

At level 4 you will be introduced to academic reading by your tutors via your module reading lists, and any additional sources they may suggest as useful pre-reading in advance of seminars or lectures. Learning how to read academic texts is a journey, and at Level 4 you can start to explore what works best for you, so that you feel prepared as you begin Level 5.

Level 5 (2nd year of undergraduate study)

By Level 5 you should be more familiar with the importance of reading to inform your knowledge on a topic, and to help you to meet the learning outcomes of your assessments. Remember to use the feedback you received at Level 4 to help you to identify any key areas for development. Often this will include recommendations to expand the quality and number of sources you read. At Level 5 you will be expected to engage more critically with sources, and to demonstrate deeper analysis and synthesis of information.

Level 6 (Final year of undergraduate study)

At Level 6 you will be expected to demonstrate more complex academic skills which will require you to read a wider range of appropriate academic texts. You will be expected to undertake more independent research, demonstrate original thought based upon the evidence you have read, and be able to construct sophisticated arguments. You may need to expand the depth and breadth of your academic reading to ensure that you can meet the requirements of learning outcomes at this level.

Level 7 (Postgraduate study)

At Level 7 you will be assessed on your ability to display a high degree of originality and critical evaluation. There is also an expectation that your work will reflect a mastery of the subject matter and that you can demonstrate advanced research skills. Reading at this level can feel daunting, especially if you have had a break from education before returning to postgraduate study. Remember that academic reading is a skill that will develop over time, and that there is plenty of support available to you at Edge Hill University. Working through this toolkit will offer some hints and tips to get you started, and you can also access additional resources, workshops and one-to-one appointments on the [UniSkills webpages](.).

Ready? Now that you have been introduced to academic texts, when to read them, why academic reading is essential, and the different level expectations, it is time to move on to the practicalities of how to read academic texts effectively.

Before you start reading

Thinking about what you want to achieve will help you to establish what you need to read. It might be useful to first ask yourself, "What do I need to learn that will enable me to understand a topic, or

respond to a task?" If you are pre-reading for a lecture or seminar you are likely to already have been given guidance about what to focus on in your course handbook, on Learning Edge (Blackboard), or through your module reading lists. However, if you are reading to complete an assessment, or to expand your knowledge, you will need to consider:

1. What you need to read (e.g., theory, policy, academic literature)
2. Where you will find it (e.g., library catalogue, search engines, databases)
3. Which format is best for you to read in (e.g., hardcopy text, screen, audio)
4. How you will organise your sources (e.g., folder for pdf downloads/useful links, external storage, reference list)

1. What to read

Thinking about what you need to read before starting to search is always useful. For example: Does your assessment require you to consider theory? Will local or national policies be important for your topic? Do you need to discuss cutting-edge research in your field? Will you need to refer to professional body guidelines?

2. Where to find it

Once you have decided what to read, you can then focus on where to find that information. The library catalogue is a great place to start your search. [Discover More](#) enables you to search for books, eBooks, journals, and journal articles. You may also want to search more subject-specific databases by accessing the [Subject Resources](#) page related to your area of study. These resources have been curated by academics in your department so will be relevant an appropriate to your subject area. For more information on how to create an effective search strategy check out our Finding Academic Information resources via the [UniSkills webpages](#).

Top tip: Remember to select sources that will help you to both answer the question and meet the learning outcomes of your assignment.

3. What format works best for you

Academic reading can be undertaken using a range of different formats. Some people prefer to read hardcopy texts, whereas others will read on screen, or listen to a text using [assistive technology](#). You may also find it helpful to use a combination of these options. The following section explains the differences in what each of these formats can offer.

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Hardcopy texts

Many people find hard copy texts easier to read than on-screen texts. Hard copy texts may be textbooks, or printed versions of journal articles. The [Subject Resources](#) section has a tab in each subject area which offers information about where to locate the physical books that are appropriate for your course.

Sustainability

If you find it difficult to read on screen and usually print out journal articles to read, it might be worth considering using assistive technology to listen to the article as an alternative way to consume the information. This option can also help to reduce any environmental impact that is incurred by printing.

Screens

Using a digital device to read is a more sustainable and practical option than printing and carrying around reams of paper. If you choose to read on screen, think about which device suits you best, such as a monitor (e.g., desktop PC or laptop), a tablet (e.g., iPad), or an E-reader (e.g., Kindle or Kobo).

Tips for effective screen reading:

- Ensure that you are sitting comfortably
- Keep a record of the sources that you read
- Use software to customise your reading (e.g., by using [assistive technology](#) to read the text aloud)

Tips for reducing distractions:

- Keep emails and social media switched off
- Use fullscreen mode while reading
- Utilise reader tools to remove ads and images

Tips for reducing eye strain:

- Reduce the brightness of the monitor or screen
- Change font sizes or adjust colour tints as appropriate
- Take regular breaks from the screen

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Audio

Listening to academic texts can be an effective way to absorb information. There are a range of ways to listen to texts including audiobooks, using assistive technology, and utilising in-database software options. The additional benefit of accessing texts in this way is that depending upon the device you use, they can often be portable and consumed while on the move!

Audiobooks. Whether you are studying specific works of fiction, or just reading for pleasure, we have a great range of audiobooks available through the [Libby app](#).

Assistive Technology. Alternatively using text-to-speech software such as [Read&Write](#), or Immersive Reader within Microsoft apps are a great way to listen to academic sources.

Database software. Some databases offer an option to listen to an article, usually by clicking on a speaker icon. For example Taylor and Francis Online offers a [text-to-audio](#) option for all journal content.

Search the help feature of whichever database you are using to see what accessibility options they offer.

Top tip: Immersive Reader is a useful app-based tool which enables you to adapt on-screen content to support your reading in a range of ways including, changing column width, page colour, line focus and text spacing. It can also offer a read aloud feature and voice selection options so that you can listen to text.

4. How to organise your sources

Once you have started to gather your sources it is useful to consider how you will organise and collate them. Keeping track of all the sources you have read will ensure that you do not lose any, and will help you build up a good range of potential references!

You may want to start immediately organising all the sources you read into a reference list or bibliography, following the relevant referencing system for your course. This can also save you time as it is easier to delete any sources you haven't cited from a reference list, than it is to compile it from scratch once you have finished your assignment.

Referencing management software such as [RefWorks](#) is another option to manage your sources. However, this is a tool, and is not fool-proof, so you will always need to check any citations and reference lists that it generates. For this reason it is usually only recommended for students

undertaking big research projects, and for those who are already familiar with the appropriate referencing system for their course.

Scheduling time to read

Scheduling in time to read before you even start to write will enable you to get a good overview of what is recent, relevant, and appropriate in your subject area. Planning in enough reading time also allows you to make connections between different ideas, arguments, and concepts. You may want to work back from your deadline date, making sure to build in contingency time, to ensure that you have plenty of time to read. For more tips on ways to manage your time effectively, check out the Preparing to Study area of the [UniSkills webpages](#).

How to read academic texts

Now that you have decided what to read and scheduled in time to do this, it is useful to think about how you will read each source. Not all texts need to be read from start to finish, and while some texts will require a lot of attention, others can be read quickly to extract key points. Therefore, selecting an appropriate reading strategy will help improve your efficiency as an academic reader.

Active reading strategies

The depth of your reading will depend upon whether you are simply assessing if a text fits with your topic or subject area, or whether you are reading to understand content. Using the following strategies can help you to become a more focused and effective academic reader.

Scanning and skimming techniques can be used initially to identify relevance and scope, whereas close reading enables you to engage more actively with a text. The following steps will guide you through this process:

Step 1: Scanning

Scanning enables you to recognise if a text is relevant, by quickly checking for any key information that is important. You can identify what general topics are covered and decide whether they are appropriate.

How to scan:

- Quickly examine each page for key words

- Try to identify important elements such as statistics, illustrations, dates and facts
- You may also choose to search for specific authors, theories or phrases

At this point you are not aiming to read the text, simply to identify its relevance.

Step 2: Skimming

Skimming enables you to understand the gist of a topic. It will give you an overview of the main themes, and help you to get a feel for the subject or ideas being discussed.

How to skim:

- Read titles, abstracts, introductions, conclusions, and any headings to help you understand the scope of the text
- Reading the first and last sentences of each paragraph can also help you decide how relevant it is
- Aim to identify the main ideas within the text rather than reading every word

At this point you are not focusing on details, simply assessing the scope of the text, and establishing whether it is worthy of more in-depth reading.

Step 3: Close Reading

Close reading of texts enables you to engage more deeply with the literature. This is where you will need to think actively about what has been written.

How to close-read:

- Slow down your reading speed and concentrate on understanding
- Highlight key points, annotate the text, and make notes
- Summarise key points in your own words

At this point you are reading to understand the text, and how it links to your topic. Reading actively will allow you to evaluate the relevance of a text, and how it supports, contradicts, or challenges other evidence you have read.

Summary

Using reading strategies such as scanning, skimming and close reading should help you to be a more effective and efficient academic reader. As with all new ways of working, it may take some time to find what works best for you.

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Being a critical reader

As well as reading actively to assess the relevance and appropriateness of the sources you select, you will also need to consider how to read them critically. Critical reading involves engaging with the text in a thoughtful, and analytical manner. For example, by questioning arguments, ideas and evidence as well as looking for connections to other sources you have read.

The step-by-step guide below outlines how to approach critical reading.

Step 1: Select the text

Having used skimming, scanning, and active reading techniques to establish relevant texts, select a key source as a starting point.

Step 2: Analyse the structure

Examine how the text is organised and what you can get out of each section. For example the layout for a journal article will be different to that of a book. Here are some things to think about when examining each source type:

Journal article	
Abstract	This is where you will find a summary of the content, including any key findings. This is a good starting point for identifying the scope and findings of the research.
Introduction	The introduction identifies gaps in existing knowledge and outlines the aims of the paper. The introduction will help to give you some context about the paper.
Methodology	This section explains how the study was designed, and the processes undertaken by the researcher(s)
Results	The findings of the study are presented in this section. There may also be statistical data in this section to support the findings
Discussion and conclusion	In this section results are interpreted and analysed, and conclusions drawn. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research may also be mentioned here.
References	You can examine the references used by the author and assess whether any of these sources may also be useful for you to read.

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Book	
Contents page	The contents page (or table of contents) will provide a visual overview of all the sections and topics covered in the book. Chapter titles and headings can help you to identify topics or themes covered in each section.
Preface	This section is written by the author, so can be useful in providing context. It usually explains the scope, motivation, and purpose of the text. The preface can help you to gain an insight into the author's intentions, therefore enabling better engagement with the book.
Foreword	The foreword is written by someone other than the author and often provides an endorsement, or critique of the book. It can also highlight the author's contribution to the field and the book's significance within it.
Introduction	This section sets the context for the book by identifying its significance, and offering background on the subject area. It will introduce the main premise or argument, and gives the author the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, which in turn establishes credibility.
Chapters	Book chapters are structured to offer an in-depth analysis of a topic or subject area. Scanning over the start and the end of a chapter can help you to decide whether it is relevant.
Conclusion	The conclusion should summarise the key arguments covered within the book. There may be some reflection upon the findings, and a recognition of the broader significance of the findings.
Appendices	Some books will have appendices which contain supplementary material, such as tables, figures or surveys.
Index	The index allows you to navigate smoothly through the book, and to focus on specific elements or topics. Important terms, names, theories and concepts are listed alphabetically along with the page numbers where this information can be found.

Step 3: Identify the main argument

Try to find the main claim that the author is presenting. This can often be located in the introduction or abstract. Understanding the main argument will help you to evaluate its effectiveness.

Step 4: Consider the author's perspective

Reflect upon the author's background. For example:

- Are they an expert in the field?
- Do they have any particular affiliations?
- Are there any obvious biases that might influence their argument?

Consider how these factors might shape the author's interpretation of the evidence.

Step 5: Analyse rhetorical devices

Rhetoric means the art of persuasion, so rhetorical devices are strategies used by authors to persuade you of their claims. Think critically about how the author has used:

Language
- Pay attention to any specialist vocabulary and terminology used
- Also think about how language might be used to persuade the reader, for example, how the author uses the work of other scholars and theories to build credibility

Tone
- This is how the author demonstrates their feelings towards an argument or subject
- Does the tone come across as formal, objective, and scholarly, or does it demonstrate a more critical voice?
- How does the tone contribute to the effectiveness of the argument or stance?

Style
Consider the author's sentence structure and format.

How does the style of the piece fit with the audience it is aimed at?

Step 6: Evaluate and synthesize the evidence

Assess the credibility and relevance of the evidence presented by the author. For example:

- How valid is the study design?
- What evidence has been provided to underpin the findings?
- Has the author provided supporting data or statistics?

- Has the author presented all their findings, or have they cherry-picked which elements to present?
- Are the arguments well-founded?
- Is the analysis valid?

Consider how the evidence is supported or refuted by other scholarly articles in the field. Think about whether it contributes to existing knowledge in the field, or if you can identify any limitations to the findings.

When to stop reading

You will not have time to read everything that has been written on a topic, and there is no magic 'right' number of sources that you should read, so how do you decide when to stop?

How many sources?

There is no right number of sources to read, however, it is never a good idea to rely upon a single source to support a point or argument as this shows a lack of wider reading. Try to be strategic and read enough to have a good overview of a topic and the current debate in that area.

Quality versus quantity

The quality of literature is more important than the number of sources you read. It is better to try and understand the arguments or topics clearly, rather than reading so much that you risk becoming confused or overwhelmed.

It's time to stop when …

- You are not learning anything new
- You have a clear understanding of the topic
- You have enough evidence to answer the assignment question
- You are unable to keep track of the sources you have read
- You can no longer concentrate

Note-making

Note-making is an essential part of academic reading. It provides you with a purpose for gathering evidence from the literature. Reading widely and making notes can help to encourage synthesis of ideas from a range of literature.

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Why make notes?

Making notes is useful for:

1. Helping you to focus on what you are reading
2. Capturing key points or arguments as you gather evidence for your assignments
3. Enabling you to better understand complex texts
4. Stimulating ideas and critical thinking as you engage with the literature
5. Supporting exam revision by summarising key points

Note-making puts you in control of your own learning. There is no right or wrong way to approach note-making, but it may require a bit of trial and error to find out which formats and strategies work best for you.

Note-making formats

Traditionally notes are hand-written or typed, but you may find it more effective to record voice notes on your phone, or take screenshots of useful information. Whichever style(s) you use, always remember to record the source of the information so you can reference it accurately! Alternatively, you may prefer to use one of the many note-taking apps available. It is always worth taking time to explore currently popular options, or asking your peers for suggestions.

Before you begin making notes, it is worth considering how you want to use them. If you intend to use your notes to study, or to inform your assignments, you will need to ensure that they are clear and easy to review.

There are a multitude of approaches to making notes, so it is important to find a strategy that works for you. Check out the options below to find out more about some of these different strategies.

Traditional note-making strategies

Linear

Taking linear notes is the most traditional note-making method and can be useful for getting key information down when reading longer texts. Writing notes in this format usually follows the order of the text you are reading. You can jot down anything that seems useful or relevant as you get to it, including as much or as little detail as necessary.

To help your notes feel useful in the future:

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- Focus on key words or phrases
- Use headings and sub-headings
- Underline and highlight key points

Mind-maps

Mind-mapping is a visual technique which allows you to see how ideas, theories and concepts link together. Usually the main argument or question is situated in the middle of the page and branches off from this are added to show associated ideas, concepts and theories.

Some people find that visually displaying their notes is an easier way to see the relationships between ideas. Colours, pictures and symbols are also sometimes added to a mind-map to support understanding of a theme.

Creating a mind-map by hand allows you to be as creative as you want, and to design your notes in a way that works for you. You may also choose to use mind-mapping software such as Inspiration, which additionally enables you to add hyperlinks, images and documents to your visual mind-map.

Inspiration software is available for all Edge Hill University students to access. When you are logged into the network on campus, navigate to the start menu and scroll down to 'Tools for Learning' where you will find the latest version of Inspiration. Alternatively you can download Inspiration to your PC via our [assistive technology](#) webpages ,where you can also find out more about how to use this software.

Cornell

The Cornell method for taking notes was devised by Cornell education professor Walter Pauk as a way to encourage students to engage more actively with topics. This method is traditionally associated with taking notes in lectures, however it is also recognised to be an effective note-making strategy to accompany academic reading.

Usually this method is used for handwritten notes, however it can also be recreated digitally. You can draw your own Cornell format, or alternatively there are plenty of free downloadable versions available online. To set up the Cornell format you will need to divide your page into 3 sections.

Firstly, draw a vertical line approximately one third of the way in from the left margin, most of the way down the page, stopping a few lines from the bottom. The wider section on the right is for your notes, and the narrower section on the left is for cues. Next, draw a horizontal line across the page to run directly under your vertical line. This section at the bottom of the page is for the summary.

How to use each section effectively:

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Notes
Write down key information such as facts, theories, ideas, or concepts.

Cues
After completing the notes section, use this area to write down any questions or comments that will help you to remember and organise the information from your notes. You can also use this section to identify what you need to study.

Summary
Briefly summarise what you have learned by distilling the key ideas into a few sentences or bullet points.

SQ3R
The SQ3R method is a systematic way of making notes on your academic reading. SQ3R stands for Survey, Question, Read, Recall (or recite), Review. It can help you to process your reading, and check your level of understanding.

Survey
Scan the text to get a feel for how it is going to be useful to you.

Question

Formulate questions before you read, e.g., What are the main ideas here? or How might I use this information?

Read
With specific questions in mind, read the text thoroughly and take notes to help you answer those questions.

Recall
Try to recall the information without returning to the original text or your notes. Sometimes this step is called 'recite' as it can be helpful to imagine that you are explaining the information to someone else. Speaking aloud is a useful technique to ensure understanding, and it can also help to develop your paraphrasing skills!

Review
Re-read your notes to establish whether you successfully recalled the information, and if you are now able to answer the question(s) you set yourself.

This note-making technique can also be used in conjunction with Cornell, as it directs you to formulate questions from the text. SQ3R is an especially useful strategy for exam revision.

Alternative strategies

Depending upon your subject area and the type of information you are reading, you may need to think about different ways of recording your notes that will be useful. A few brief examples of alternate note-making strategies that may be more appropriate, are outlined below.

Tables

Tables can be useful when you need to compare two or more contrasting things. By noting them side-by-side in a table you can see any similarities and differences more clearly.

Flowcharts

Flowcharts can help you to present complex ideas or processes in a clear and simple format. Drawing lines, arrows, or diagrams to show how ideas link together can help you create connections between pieces of information.

Timelines

Timelines may be useful for clarifying a sequence or chronological order of events.

Herringbone maps

Herringbone notes are structured like a fish skeleton, and can be useful if you are noting down contrasting sies of an argument or concept. The main topic or idea represents the spine with different points added to the 'bones' which connect to the spine. This strategy offers a visual overview of both ideas or viewpoints.

What not to do!

Note-making is a skill, and it may take practice to find out what works best for you. Here are 5 common note-making errors that can reduce the effectiveness and efficiency of your notes, alongside tips on how to avoid making them.

1. Copying information verbatim

Copying large sections of information word-for-word:

- Stops you engaging with and understanding the text
- Focuses on the author's words rather than their ideas
- Can leave you vulnerable to plagiarism

Tip: It is good practice to note down ideas in your own words

2. Writing too much

Attempting to capture all the information you read is often counter-productive, as it can become overwhelming.

Tips:

- Try focusing on the most important points, and summarising any key ideas
- Using abbreviations, symbols or diagrams that make sense to you can also help to reduce the volume of your notes

3. Disorganised notes

If you do not organise your notes, it can be hard to make sense of the information when you need it.

Tips:

- Try out some of the suggested note-making strategies to find a style that works for you
- When note-making from different texts on the same topic, think about how logically to organise these sets of notes

4. Forgetting to record your sources

If you fail to note down where the information came from, this can lead to problems when you want to cite it.

Tips:

- Always notes down enough of the bibliographic information to enable you to trace the original source
- If you are reading to complete an assessment, you may want to create a reference list before you start to read and make notes

5. Failing to review your notes

It is easy to mistakenly assume that making notes is enough to help you retain the information.

Tips:

- Reviewing notes enables you to make connections with other sources you have read

- Reading back over previous notes can help reinforce your understanding of key concepts and ideas

Note-making exercise

A great way to develop your note-making skills is to practice. Select a piece of text from a journal article or textbook which you can use, and imagine that you are doing research on that topic. As you read this source, think about what information might be useful in enabling you to demonstrate your understanding of the topic.

Step 1: Open a blank document so that you are ready to make notes.

Step 2: Read the text that you have chosen, and note down any information that you think will be useful.

Tips:

- Keep your notes simple and to the point
- Avoid copying and pasting full sentences!
- Always remember to record the source of the information so that you can cite it correctly in your work

Step 3: Assess your notes, by using the following prompting questions:

- Are your notes clear and easy to review without the original text?
- Did you learn something new about the topic by undertaking this exercise?
- Would you do anything differently next time?

Step 4: Think about adding your own thoughts, reflections or questions to your notes. For example, if you have noted down the key findings from a report mentioned in an article, you might want to add a note to remind yourself to look for the original report. Remember to make sure that you can identify easily what information is from the source, and what is your own additional notes. You might want to do this by highlighting your individual thoughts or reflections in a different colour.

Summary: Making notes in this way helps you to engage with and process ideas from the text, rather than focusing on the specific wording used by the author. It also supports a unique voice in your writing, while still maintaining accurate use of evidence from the literature.

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As with any other academic skill, it is important to find and use a style of note-making that works best for you.

Using your Notes

Now that you have become more familiar with active reading strategies and techniques for making notes, it is important to consider how you can use those notes effectively. Using the notes from your reading to inform your academic writing can help you to produce logical and well-evidenced assignments. Reviewing your notes can also help you to feel more informed in lectures and seminars, and more organised and prepared for exams.

Reviewing

Whilst making notes is a key academic skill, this alone is not enough to ensure that you retain the information and are able to use it effectively. Reviewing your notes is an important part of the learning process, and can help you to:

- Make connections with other sources you have read
- Reinforce your understanding of key concepts and ideas
- Identify whether you have done enough reading on the topic

It is worth considering how you can utilise your notes more effectively, for example when assignment planning, preparing for exams or just to expand your knowledge base.

Assignment planning

The academic reading that you have done acts as the groundwork for ensuring that your writing will be evidence-based. Therefore, you will need to have read in enough depth and breadth to be able to complete your assignment, and meet the learning outcomes associated with it.

Reviewing your notes can help you to plan your assignment, and to identify whether you have done enough reading.

Tips:

- Organise your notes according to the themes you have identified from your title and learning outcomes, as this will help you to focus on one area at a time
- As you review your notes on each theme, consider whether you have read enough to enable you to write in depth on that topic

- When you translate your notes into writing make sure to use your own words (this will be easier if you have made effective notes rather than copying text word-for-word)

Reading informs writing, so it is essential to read widely enough to have a good understanding of a topic before you start to write. Remember that it is not good practice to rely upon a single source to support a point or argument, as this shows a lack of wider reading.

Exam preparation

Using notes from your reading to prepare for an exam is a good way to enhance your understanding of a topic. Effective revision notes can also help to increase your retention of the material.

Before starting your revision, remember to ensure you know what learning outcomes are being assessed in your exam. This will help you to know what to focus your revision on.

Tips:

- Organise your notes by theme or topic (it can help to refer to any specific exam guidance)
- Re-read one theme at a time (this will help you to identify if you have done enough reading on each area)
- Try to rewrite important information in your own words (summarise any key concepts and definitions)

Writing out the key information from your notes supports you to understand the material, rather than just memorise it!

Expanding your knowledge

Any reading that you do will expand your knowledge base. As you make notes on your academic reading you are further underpinning this knowledge. Pre-reading for lectures and seminars can help to broaden your understanding of a topic or subject area. Reviewing the notes made on this, or any additional reading:

- Can help to reinforce your knowledge base
- Will enable you to strengthen connections between ideas, theories and concepts on similar topics
- Can enable you to contextualise your area of study

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Remember, no additional reading is ever wasted! Even if you do not use all the information you have gathered when undertaking a piece of assessment, everything you learn helps you to build depth of knowledge in your subject area.

Are you ready to produce content?

Thinking about whether you agree with all the statements in this checklist below will help you to establish whether you have read enough on a topic to get started:

1. I could confidently discuss this topic in depth
2. I understand a range of arguments or theories in relation to this topic
3. I have made effective notes using my own words
4. I can support my knowledge with evidence from a wide range of good quality academic sources
5. I have reviewed and organised my notes into relevant themes or topics
6. I have enough evidence to help me address all the learning outcomes that are being assessed for this piece of work

If you have agreed with all the statements in the checklist, you may be ready to get started with your assignment, however, if you have not been able to agree with all these statements, you may not be fully prepared to get started with your assignment.

Readiness recap:

- Learning subject-specific content in lectures, seminars and on placements will expand your understanding and may allow you to discuss a topic confidently, but to ensure that all your assignments are evidence-based you will also need to have read independently on that topic.

- Reading a wide range of good quality sources to ensure you can identify different arguments and theories, as well as making effective notes will increase your chances of submitting successful assignments.

- Reviewing your notes, and presenting evidence in your own words (whilst always remembering to cite the original source!), will also help you to find your unique voice and writing style.

- Once you have ensured that you have read enough evidence to help you meet all your learning outcomes, you are ready to get started!

Why not check out some of the other [UniSkills toolkits and resources](#) to support the next step towards academic writing, presentation skills, or exam technique?

Top tip: This checklist can be accessed every time you want to assess your readiness to get started writing or producing content for an assessed piece of work.

Related Resources

Useful reading

To learn more about the importance of academic reading and note-making you might find Chapter 3 of the following text useful: PENN, P., 2020. *The Psychology of effective studying: how to succeed in your degree* [eBook]. Abingdon: Routledge. Available from: https://edgehill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1112671827 [Accessed 23 July 2024].

Another useful text is: COTTRELL, S., 2024. *The Study Skills Handbook* [eBook]. 6th ed. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. Available from: https://edgehill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1436830178 [Accessed 23 July 2024].

Useful links

Check out our range of interactive toolkits as well as plenty of other useful resources on the [UniSkills webpages](#).

UniSkills blogs

UniSkills write regular [blogs](#), including a monthly focus on library resources and academic skills. In these quick reads you can learn about useful resources, how to access them and their benefits to your studies. You might even find us exploring new ways of thinking!

Other resources

Check out [LinkedIn Learning](#) for free, unlimited access to thousands of high quality online courses and video tutorials written by industry experts.

UniSkills Support at Edge Hill University

As well as our toolkits, there are many ways you can access support for your academic skills development. No question or query is too big or too small. Whether you are new to studying or

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need to refresh or develop skills, we have a range of options for you to access at both graduate and postgraduate taught level.

Webpages

Reach your potential and visit our [UniSkills webpages](). Find out more about the support designed to help you develop your academic skills and confidence at university and beyond. Whatever your subject or level of study, UniSkills has something to offer.

Workshops and webinars

[UniSkills workshops and webinars]() are an opportunity for a deeper dive into a specific skill that will support you on your academic journey. Facilitated by our friendly and knowledgeable Academic Skills Advisors, these sessions provide an informal safe space where you will be supported alongside other students in a small group setting.

Appointments

All students are able to book a [one-to-one appointment](). Our experienced Academic Skills Advisors can help you develop your academic skills and strategies throughout your time at university. One-to-one support is available on a wide range of topics including academic reading, writing and referencing, finding information, and preparing your assignment for submission.

AskUs

For any questions across any of our library and learning services, you can [Ask Us online]().

Campaigns

Explore our year-round [UniSkills campaigns]() to enhance your academic journey at Edge Hill. From pre-arrival prep to acing your exams, we've got something for everyone!

Keep in touch

Library and Learning Services Instagram

Make sure you're following us over on Instagram for all the latest Library and Learning Services news, events and support: @EHULibrary

You'll discover: weekly what's on stories; reminders about upcoming campaigns and events; fun, interactive polls and competitions; hidden treasures from our Archive; and reading for pleasure recommendations.

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Library and Learning Services Blog

In the [Library and Learning Services (LS) blog](#) you'll find lots of information, ideas and support curated by a wide range of staff and students from across the service.

Browse through all our useful blogs via the Home tab or visit individual areas of interest via the sub-blog headings along the menu bar.

Your views count

Thank you for engaging with this toolkit. We'd love to know what you thought, and you can share your feedback in our short [UniSkills Toolkit Satisfaction Survey](#). The survey should take you no longer than five minutes to complete.

Your feedback helps us to continually improve our support - thank you!

You have now completed this UniSkills toolkit and can close the window. We hope you found it useful, and we look forward to continuing to support you with your academic skills development.