# Reading and Research Skills
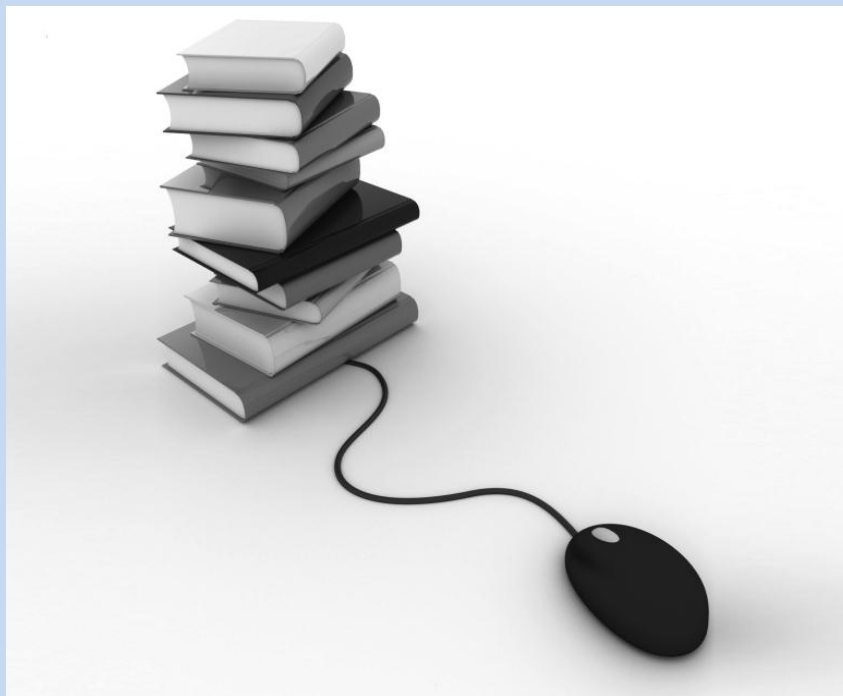
# Academic skills guide 6

# Produced by Dyslexia Support
# Enabling Services

View at www.soton.ac.uk/edusupport/dyslexia

# Contents

## Introduction

There has been a massive increase in the amount of reading material we are all exposed to, largely driven by the internet. None of us has time to read everything that comes our way, but we can all develop skills to help select what we need to read. Making the most of any time invested in reading is a key factor to academic success.

Dyslexic students often consider they read slowly. This might be because they slow down to read long words, find it hard to remember what they have read or interrupt the reading flow by reaching for the dictionary.

Short-term memory weakness, phonic difficulties and slow processing – all associated with dyslexia - may impact on the reading process and make reading a challenge at university.

Some dyslexic students report that they have not developed much of a reading habit. They might have opted for a maths, science or engineering course, thinking that the reading content would be limited, only to find that this is not necessarily the case.

## How do you approach reading?

It is helpful to examine the way you approach your reading skills.

For example do you……
- Read slowly and word for word?
- Backtrack and reread if you do not understand something?
- Know what you are looking for?
- Actively recall what you have read?
- Make useful brief notes?
- Keep a note of references as you go along?

You may believe that if you **read slowly** you will have a thorough understanding of the text, but this is not true. The slow reader is more likely to miss the point of the text.

You should aim to avoid **backtracking** when reading a text for the first time. This is a habit that can be hard to break. It involves reading a few words and then going back over them because you have not understood the point properly. By doing this, you are interrupting the flow of reading and confusing your understanding rather than clarifying it. It is far better to get to the end of a section by reading it straight through and then re-reading it if necessary.

You should try to avoid 'sounding out' words as you read. This can also slow you down.

## Changing the way that you read

Reading can be a very passive activity. The more slowly you read the less active your brain and you could easily find yourself drifting off. The aim is to make it more **active**.

**It is important to vary your reading style depending on your reading purpose**. No single method of reading is suitable for every reading task. Skimming is useful for finding important information quickly, but you may need to read sections of text thoroughly.

Generally, though, you really don't have to read EVERY word line by line - this honestly won't aid your understanding. You may need to read a chapter or paper two or three times at different levels of intensity. The **first time** you should quickly scan to get the general gist or a skeleton of understanding. Don't worry about what you can't understand at this stage.

Give yourself a **time limit** and stick to it. Be aware of which parts seem to be important and which you may need to go back to and read again.

(See Stella Cottrell *The Study Skills Handbook* **Am I a smart reader?** for more information).

## Eyes and dyslexia

Some people, not necessarily those with dyslexia, may suffer a degree of visual distortion or **visual stress** when reading. They may find that they easily lose their place, the words may appear to jump or blur, or they might experience eye strain when reading for sustained periods? Others find black text on white hard to read. The symptoms can often be eased by the use of **coloured overlays** and/or **coloured lenses**.

If you feel that you might be experiencing reading difficulties of this sort, please book an appointment with Dyslexia Support for a coloured overlay screening test. Using coloured overlays or copying onto coloured paper may help.

See [www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/about-dyslexia/further-information/eyes-and-dyslexia.html](www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/about-dyslexia/further-information/eyes-and-dyslexia.html) for more information.

## Eye movements

One way we can change the way we read is to change eye movements.

Our eyes do not move smoothly over the page when reading but make small and fairly regular jumps, or **fixations**, from point to point. Slower readers tend to take in fewer words at each fixation. Increasing the number of words at each fixation should help develop a faster reading speed.

This is not as complicated as it sounds. If you are prepared to practise, you can train yourself to read faster, improve your concentration and your level of comprehension. You can start to read larger chunks of text at each fixation, which should lead to an increase in reading speed.

Instead of moving your eyes across the page from left to right and from line to line, try some of these methods illustrated on the next page. Remember you are not trying to read **every** word.
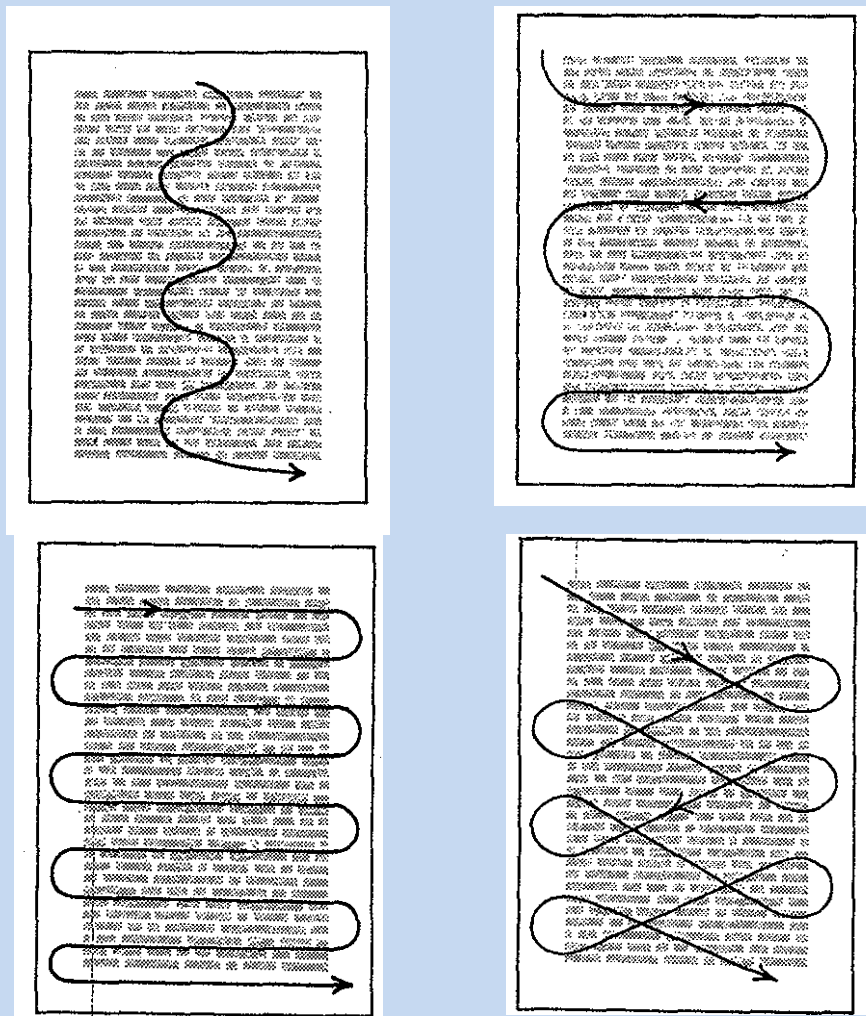


Taken from Tony Buzan: *The Speed Reading Book* BBC Publications

You might like to look at **Motivational Magic** which uses a hand motion to stop you from backtracking:
www.motivationalmagic.com/articles4/group4/speedreading-8.php

You could try the following scanning **exercise** with a partner or your dyslexia tutor:
- Choose a simple page of text.
- Relax your eyes and look at the word in the middle of the top line.
- Be aware of words to the right and left of that word.
- Ask your reading partner to select a word for you to find.

- Move your eyes down the page in a gently sweeping wave or using one of the methods in the illustrations. If you don't find the word go up to the top and start again.
- Try again with another word.

You should be able to spot the selected words much quicker than a word for word, line by line approach. Hopefully this illustrates how quickly you can find something when **you know what you are looking for**.

## Skimming and scanning

**Scanning** means that you are **searching** text for particular words or phrases. It is the skill you use when looking in a telephone directory or the index of a book.

**Skimming** means **gathering** as much information as possible from a text in the shortest possible time. It is the skill you should use when you want to see if a chapter of a book is going to be suitable for your needs.

Skimming and scanning may be useful ways to approach a lot of academic texts.

There are **exercises** for you to practise selecting skimming and scanning at:
www.uefap.com/reading/exercise/scan/spoon.htm
www.uefap.com/reading/readfram.htm

## Speed reading

Many students say they can't understand anything if they read quickly, but speed reading is not necessarily about reading **all** of a text faster.

There are many books on speed reading - but what does the term actually mean?  Sometimes amazing claims are made. Paul Scheele in his book *PhotoReading* says that it's possible to "mentally photograph" 25,000 words a minute.

However, this method, which basically echoes other similar techniques, requires you to be **selective** in your reading. This means knowing what you want out of a text and training your eyes and brain to spot key words. The following should set you on the road to being a more effective reader.

### Identifying a purpose to your reading
If you did any of the skimming/scanning exercises from the link above you will probably have found that it is easier if you have specific questions to guide your reading.

We forget most of what we read unless we can identify a **few key points**. Try to identify a clear **purpose** to your reading.

Producing a FEW key notes will aid your recall.

# Survey reading

To understand an article or chapter, you should first aim to develop a **skeleton of understanding**. You can do this by survey reading which means previewing the text. This is the first stage in reading. Don't worry about what you don't understand at this point- just aim to get the general idea. Focus on what you can understand at this stage.

## 1. Look at:
- Titles and headings
- Diagrams
- Abstract or the first paragraph
- Topic sentences (the first sentence of each paragraph)
- Signpost words such as first, secondly, however, alternatively
- Key words (it might be useful to jot down a list before you  start)
- The last paragraph or conclusion.

Be active: while survey reading, annotate or use Post-its to indicate which parts might be:
- Useful                              **
- Difficult to understand     ?
- Irrelevant                         X

Add **very brief notes** in the margin or on post-its in your own words. This is far more useful for recall and understanding than excessive highlighting, especially if your reading is interrupted.

## 2. Question/Find a focus
Ask yourself some definite questions to focus on when you read. This gives a PURPOSE to your reading. You may not have the time to read ALL of the text and understand it in great detail.  Remember: your comprehension improves if your mind is actively searching for answers to questions, for example:
- Why am I reading this?
- What do I want to find out?
- What new information will it contain?
- Will I need all the information or just a specific section?

You could try to further define your focus…
- I want to find to find three reasons why…
- How is X different from Y…
- Is there an example of xxx

Your answers to the questions will:
- Give you a clear purpose for your reading
- Help you to decide how to read
- Help make your reading easier
- Allow you to check whether your reading has been successful

### 3. Read again – selectively

After surveying and identifying a focus you may want to look through sections again, particularly sections marked ** .  Look for the main ideas and answers to your questions.

### 4. Recall

Mentally go through the ideas you have just read and pick out the main points.  Check that you can answer the questions you had set yourself. When you have read a complete section make notes of important facts and main ideas.

### 5. Review

Look back at your questions to see if the passage has answered all your questions.  Check whether you need to re-read a section.

You don't need long periods of **time** to read. It's better to read actively and with a focus for ten minutes than stare over a book for half an hour losing concentration.

## Making notes

Avoid making notes as you read. This is not good because:
- It is time consuming
- Your notes will probably be too long
- It is passive and does not encourage academic thinking
- The notes may not be necessary

Limit the highlighter too! Otherwise you'll just have to read long sections again.

Instead, read sections and make limited notes in your own words.  Use a summary sheet or try diagrammatic formats such as a Mind Map. This will help the activity to be more active.

## To summarise:
- Identify a focus to your reading
- Try to get a broad understand by surveying the text
- Select which parts you may need to reread (and skip those you don't need to read)
- Put a time limit on your reading
- Afterwards make brief notes in your own words
- Keep references.

You could try this out with tutor guidance – perhaps using one of your text books. You may be surprised how quickly you can change old habits.

See also steps to systematic reading in *Beat the Bumf!* By Kathyrn Redway

# Reading summary sheet

The reading summary sheet below can be used when note taking from books. It avoids writing long notes and is particularly useful when preparing for an essay or to organise your dissertation reading.

**Book/journal/webpage title**

**Author/s**

**Volume**

**Date of publication**

**Place of publication**

| Main point | Page |
|---|---|
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
| How can I use this information?<br><br><br>Where will it fit into my plan? |  |

## Computer-based resources

**Study Skills Toolkit**
This site has been developed by eLanguages at the University of Southampton www.elanguages.ac.uk and has useful interactive learning materials.

How to view the Study Skills Toolkit
1. Log in to www.blackboard.southampton.ac.uk
2. As a student you will have been automatically enrolled to use this resource. Select Study Skills Toolkit under My Courses.
3. Work through any of the learning tools that you might find useful.

**Text-to-speech software**
Many dyslexic students say that listening to text being read improves their comprehension. This is because they can focus on the meaning and not have to grapple with reading complex words. A word of caution, while computer-generated speech has improved, it can still be challenging to listen to for a long time.

Selecting text to listen to is essential to make the most of text-to-speech. You still need to develop skills in identifying key sections as outlined earlier.

You may have been awarded *Read and Write Gold* or *ClaroRead* through the DSA. This has a range of functions, apart from text-to-speech, including screen masking which blocks out text not being read to aid concentration; PDF reader and scanning which lets the reader scan a text document such as a page from a book to convert it into a readable form.

This software is also available on the computers in the Assistive Technology Centres.

**To make the most of this and other software, if you are in receipt of the DSA you are strongly advised to take up training. Please refer to your needs assessment for the name of your trainer or contact the Wessex Needs Assessment Centre:** wessexdsa@soton.ac.uk

There are also several **open source** (free) text-to speech applications available. Here are a few (typically PC-only):

- Howjsay  www.howjsay.com/
- Balabolka  www.cross-plus-a.com/balabolka.htm

If you are a Mac user, go to preferences/accessibility for the built-in reader.

**Open Library**
Books and papers that can be read online and in several other formats, including PDF and Kindle. It has the ambitious aim of creating a webpage for every book published. It offers a service to the print disabled (which includes people with dyslexia).

One student commented:

> '*I have to work with ancient manuscripts and find that the online Open Library record interpreter is really helpful when it comes to Latin roots. I use two screens and scan the manuscript into Word and then add notes in comment boxes*'.

Information at: http://openlibrary.org/about

Sign up at  http://openlibrary.org/account/create

**Using the Internet for research**

This is what Dan Russell, a search anthropologist at Google, has to say about search skills:

> '*You really need to have a basic set of tools to help you find what you need, and then process it in some useful way….. Remember that although the web is a wonderful place, not all answers are out there to be picked up like beautiful stones on the beach.   You still need to dig for the information clams!*'

Taken from his blog at http://searchresearch1.blogspot.co.uk/ Tuesday, August 14, 2012.

**The University Library Service**
The University library service has a very helpful website
www.southampton.ac.uk/library/infoskills/

This covers skills such as database search and referencing while online tutorials introduce you to library services and resources.

Deskside training is available to staff (University, NHS and NOC) and research postgraduates only.

Undergraduates or taught postgraduate student can contact the **Academic Liaison Librarians** who can help and advise you on issues relating to specific subject areas
www.southampton.ac.uk/library/about/liaison/01liaisonlibrarians.html

The University's **academic skills webpage** has information on research up to PhD level in the section A Guide to Research Methods
www.academic-skills.soton.ac.uk/

**Tips on checking your sources**
On the Internet the source of the information may not always be made explicit but in academic work you must be able to cite reliable sources. Always look for statements of authorship. Is there any information about their qualifications, their position or who they work for?

If you've never heard of the sources try doing a quick Internet search on their name. Does Google tell you more about their credentials?

## Reference management/bibliographic software

It is vital to keep a record of your references as you go along. There are various ways of doing this electronically. This saves you time, ensures accuracy and can automatically convert to the Harvard format. Bibliographic software is also known as reference management software.

There are some open source web-based versions such as Zotero and Mendeley. You need to be using your own computer confidently to make best use of these.

**EndNote**
This a powerful bibliographic referencing tool. It creates a personal 'library' of all your reference sources. You can use *EndNote* to insert citations into your written work, which then automatically creates and formats a full reference list. This software saves a great deal of time, especially for longer projects and dissertations.

*EndNote* is available on all University workstations.  Again, if you have been awarded this software you are strongly advised to book individual training with the Wessex Needs Assessment Centre.

The library website has useful information and tutorials on bibliographic and software referencing, including EndNote at:

http://www.southampton.ac.uk/library/infoskills/bibliographic/

**Fact Folder** from *Read and Write 9 Gold* will enable the collation of key facts from websites and other applications with the date and website address being automatically saved; ideal for any bibliography that maybe required.

There is a referencing/citation tool in **Word 2010**. To see how this works click on:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRjKD2HQPGg&feature=related](www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRjKD2HQPGg&feature=related)

Useful book: Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2010) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide.* 8th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Lexdis**

If you enjoy using technology [www.lexdis.org.uk/](www.lexdis.org.uk/) has many creative ideas from students about how to work, learn and revise. It also has a section on Accessibility. Check it out.

There is a host of useful stuff on the site mainly contributed by Southampton students. Here's an example hit upon by searching *research + dyslexia*

- Use ctrl + F to find a word in a document or web page.

One student nurse finds this function useful when reading wordy policies:

- If you know you need a specific item such as 'consent' – then use ctrl + F [command + F], add the word to the search box and find it directly.

## Finally:

You will need to adapt your reading style and speed to suit the material you are reading. Replacing old reading habits with new ones will take a little practice and you might want to book a **specialist 1-1 session** to try this out with tutor guidance – perhaps using one of your text books. You may be surprised how quickly you can pick up more effective reading methods.

**Academic skills guides available from Dyslexia Support**

1. Academic writing
2. Dissertations and project writing
3. Memory, revision and exam technique
4. Note taking and note making
5. Organisation and time management
6. Reading and research skills

View on line or download www.soton.ac.uk/edusupport/dyslexia

Do you know about the *Study Skills Toolkit*?

This is a set of interactive online resources to help you develop your academic skills.

Log into the University's Blackboard website www.blackboard.soton.ac.uk and look for the link to *Study Skills Toolkit*

There is also the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) Toolkit

for international students.