

## Reading Efficiently for Lectures and Seminars

At University, students are faced with a huge amount of reading and they sometimes despair about how to get through lengthy reading lists in what seems to be an impossibly short space of available time.

You can read more efficiently if you have a clear sense of your

**READING PURPOSE.**

Your reading purpose will be dictated by the academic activity you are preparing for. You will read differently, according to whether you are getting ready for a lecture, preparing for a seminar or researching for an essay. These different activities require different approaches to reading. Learning what these approaches are will help you to become a more efficient reader.

### Reading For A Lecture

What is the purpose of a lecture? It is ***not*** usually to provide you with all the information you need to pass your exam or write your essay!

The purpose of a lecture is usually to give you some basic ideas that you need to explore before you look more deeply into the subject. It is your starting-point. The lecture may be designed to inspire you or to awaken your intellectual curiosity.



You will always need to do some reading both before and after a lecture.

#### Before:

What is ***your*** purpose in reading before going to a lecture? Well, you will probably want to gain a **broad overview** of the topic first. Mastering the key facts first will help you to understand the lecturer's argument better. This is a good idea even if there is no set reading. So do some simple background reading first! Introduce yourself to the subject. Familiarise yourself with basic facts, key terms, dates and names. Don't pressurise yourself – just do what you can.

### QUESTIONS FOR LECTURE READING

The kind of questions you might ask yourself for lecture reading:

‘What basic facts don’t I know?’

‘What words/terms don’t I understand?’

‘What are the important concepts I need to understand?’

For example, imagine you are going to a lecture entitled “Galapagos – in the footsteps of Darwin.”

Before you go to the lecture, start to brainstorm – ask yourself some **Wh-** questions **Where** are the Galapagos? **Who** was Darwin? **What** was his connection with the Galapagos? Did he go there? If so, **why** did he go? **What** did he find? **How** did that affect his thinking? **What challenges** are there to his thinking?

You can take this approach with almost *any* lecture. You needn’t give this type of preparation more than 30 minutes. Don’t give it too long! You do not need to read complex academic sources at this stage. You can even do it on your phone on the bus! Go online – even look up key terms in Wikipedia. (it’s O.K. to make Wikipedia or a similar source your **starting**-point to help you grasp key facts, as long as it’s **not** your **finishing**-point!) Explore – one question leads to another! Go easy on yourself at this stage and turn this preparation into fun.

If you do this simple preparation before a lecture, you will find it much easier to concentrate on the lecture and remember key points afterwards.

If you do not understand everything during your ‘before’ reading, that is fine. The lecture might make everything clearer.

#### After:

If you still have questions after a lecture, your ‘after’ reading is a good time to look up terms or expand upon what the lecturer has said. Find definitions for any terms not understood. Expand upon foundation knowledge. Fill any gaps.

This will help you so much later when you are revising.

### STUDY TIP

Find a Study Partner to discuss your reading and see if you can help each other understand. Have a coffee together after a lecture to discuss the lecture.

Discussion will always help you to remember the key points.

## Reading For A Seminar

Unlike a lecture, you usually have a piece of **set** reading to do before a seminar, such as a journal article. It can be embarrassingly obvious if you haven't read it! And it makes it harder for you to participate in the seminar discussion.

What is the purpose of a seminar? The purpose of a seminar is to help you deepen your thinking through discussion, to debate contestable issues, to give your opinion freely and to listen to the opinion of others. If there is something in the reading that you do not understand, the seminar is the place to ask questions about it.

You will certainly need to have done some reading beforehand in order to get the most out of your seminars! You may not have much time, but at least try to read **something**, even if you can't read everything.

Again, you will keep yourself engaged with your reading if you 'put yourself in the driver's seat' and ask the text questions.

The questions you ask of your seminar reading may be different from those you asked of your lecture reading. For your seminar, you will probably want to focus in your reading on an author's **argument**.

### QUESTIONS FOR SEMINAR READING

The kind of questions you might ask yourself for seminar reading:

'What is the author's argument?'

'What's missing?'

Is there an opposite point of view?

'Do I agree/disagree with this? Why/why not?'

You will need to do this when reading for your essays too.

So what's the difference?

In a seminar, you have the opportunity to talk about these thoughts with your classmates and your tutor before you are graded on them in your writing.

Talking the arguments through in a seminar helps to clarify your ideas and refine your thinking BEFORE you write your essay, potentially leading to better marks.

**STUDY TIP**

**When reading an article for a seminar, it can be helpful to keep a **READING LOG** to note down what you **DON'T** understand.**

A Reading Log is a very personal record. It is written in informal conversational English (NOT in “academic” language) and it is for your eyes only. It is a reflective account of your thoughts and feelings about what you are reading.

As you read, you should note down in your log what you **DON'T** understand, what seems odd to you or what your reactions and responses are to what the author is saying.

For example, suppose you are reading, as you may well do, about a philosophy called phenomenism and you come across a sentence like this:

“Phenomenalist philosophers state that physical objects do not exist in themselves, but only exist as perceptions of a person’s mind or senses”.

In your reading log, you might write something like this:

*“Wow! That’s amazing! Does that mean that my mobile and my books disappear when I walk away from them? I don’t get it – aren’t things made up of atoms or something? Is this guy actually saying that material things only exist as ideas in my mind? That’s mind-blowing. Don’t flowers have any smell if there’s no one there to smell them? I DON’T GET IT!!!!”*

These are the kind of reflections and questions that you could usefully bring to a seminar discussion.

Your questions about your reading are usually more interesting than your answers.