

# Effective reading

## Introduction

There are many reasons why students are uncertain about what reading to do, especially when it comes to developing written assignments. This handout offers some advice, useful techniques and a tool that should help to bring better focus about what to read.

## Myths and realities about reading

Myth	Reality
I need to read every word of every text.	Only some texts need to be read in full, and in depth, for example, poems, or articles to be critiqued.
I'll miss something important if I don't read everything.	It is better to read relevant sections of books, and to use skills such as skimming and scanning to find relevant parts of any resource.
A huge bibliography will impress the marker and improve my grades.	Markers expect to see a list of resources relevant to the task given, and which includes a range of text types.
I don't need to read that much as my own ideas are most important.	All students within HE need to engage in academic reading in order to improve their knowledge, thinking and assignments.
It does not matter how old my references are.	Unless you need to include a historical perspective, try to use up-to-date reading, for example, over the last 10 years.

## Finding suitable texts for an assignment

1 Before you do any work on an assignment you must understand what you are being asked to do, which means analysing the task set. Our handout *One way to plan an essay* demonstrates how to deconstruct a title/task. You will need to understand any task words, such as 'evaluate' or 'outline'. Our handout *Essays: task words* gives a list of all such words you are likely to encounter – all ASK handouts are available at [www.port.ac.uk/ask/handouts](http://www.port.ac.uk/ask/handouts).

2 It is also very important to read and understand any instructions given, and to refer to learning outcomes/criteria that link to the task.

**Having a sound understanding of the task, including any instructions, gives a solid foundation for selecting appropriate reading.**

3 Once you know what is being asked it is a very good idea to draft a plan. Putting a plan on paper, or using planning software such as *Inspiration*, gets your initial ideas out in front of you. Always use your deconstructed title/task when developing a plan.

- 4 Once you have a deconstructed title and some initial ideas, you can use these to help you plan your reading. You can also use a tool called a reading grid, which will help you think about what to read, and is then used to record main points. Here's what to do:
- Think about what you need to find out in order to respond to the task. You might need to ask some questions, compare and contrast theories, or look at the pros and cons of something. You might see that the task requires a thematic approach.
  - Write down your questions/themes/items that need comparing.
  - Use what you have written down to help you search for reading material. What words or phrases could you use to help with effective online searching? (If you need help with this, go to a Library information desk or get online help at: [www.port.ac.uk/library/help](http://www.port.ac.uk/library/help))
  - In order to avoid reading unhelpful texts it is a good idea to read the abstract of an article, or to look at the contents pages of a book, to see if any of the content is suitable.
  - Always make notes when reading for an assignment, making sure you write down the details you need for the bibliography. Use your questions/themes/other to guide your reading and note making.
  - Try using a reading grid to help you record the main points in a way that gives you an overview. Hint: use one reading grid for one purpose, for example, themes. An example of how to use the grid can be seen below.

**Remember – inappropriate reading for an assignment will never add to the quality of your response, and will often waste your time and effort.**

### Example reading grid

This example has been adapted from one developed by an undergraduate student. It was used to answer questions about zines (hand-made magazines), and helped to develop themes and structure for a dissertation.

	Why are there still handmade zines?	Ezines/blogs – a good substitute?	Collecting ephemera: retro – cool – memory?
<b>Value and validity of Art zines – journal</b>	Many [artists] continue to produce affordable zines despite their work being published or shown in galleries.	Some zines appear in PDF format, but PDF art zines are a poor substitute.	Theory of retro nostalgia: 'a fondness or preference for obsolete technology...'. Zines are hard to get – limited edition.
<b>Why zines matter – journal</b>	Writer finds their students start making own zines when taught about them. Zines need greater level of aesthetic decision-making than blogs.	Some critics predict expansion of emedia will see death of zines, books, paper media.	Zines deliberately reject many aspects of mainstream publishing. They take the form of ephemera, such as doodles.
<b>Fanzines. Teal Tiggs, 2010 – book</b>	The zine form and how it is made shape the reader's understanding of what is being communicated.	Recent technological advances have changed how fanzines are viewed.	Fanzines or zines are still hidden, 'flying beneath the radar of mainstream publishing'. They're like collectables – hard to find, satisfying to acquire.