

Reading and Research Skills

A Guide for Students



Dyslexia Services

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www.soton.ac.uk/edusupport/dyslexia

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Changing the way that you read.....	4
Eye movements.....	4
Skimming and scanning.....	6
Speed reading.....	6
Survey reading.....	7
Reading summary sheet.....	8
Making notes.....	10
Assistive technologies.....	10
Eyes and dyslexia.....	11

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).

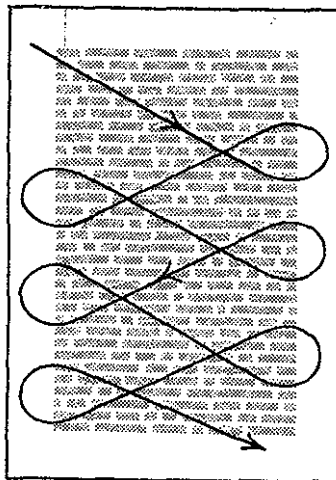
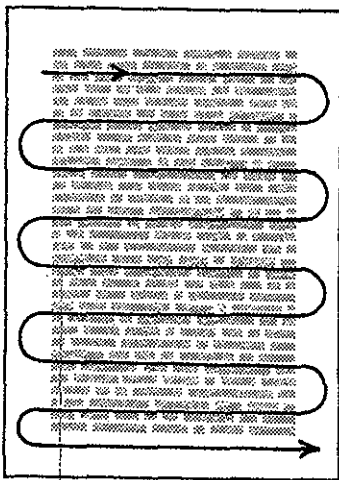
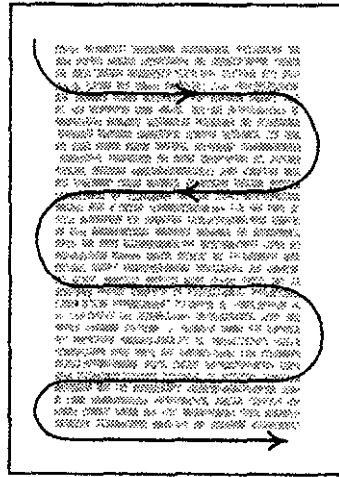
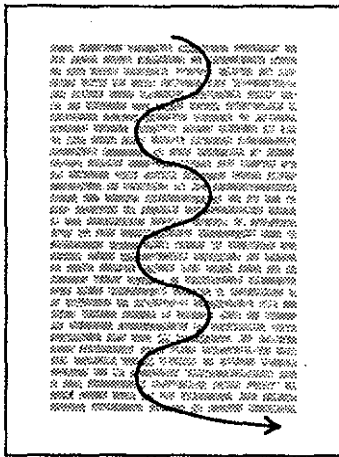
Eye movements

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 below. 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 who use Dyslexia Services 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. This video gives more information:

<http://selfhelpgroups.in/free-self-help/learnphotoreading-com-free-seminar-on-photoreading>

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.

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.

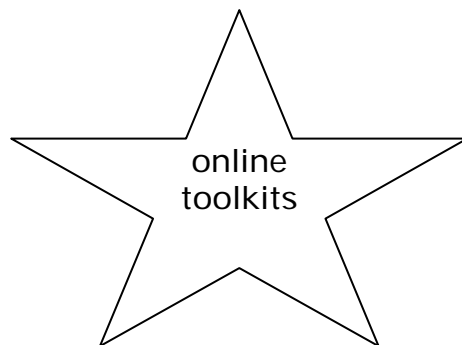
4. Recall

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.



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. Go to www.blackboard.southampton.ac.uk
2. Log in.
3. As a student you will have been automatically enrolled to use this resource. Select Study Skills Toolkit under My Courses.

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.

See also steps to systematic reading in *Beat the Bumf* p 112

Making notes

Do not make 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.

Assistive Technologies

There are a number of reading support software programs which you may have been awarded through the DSA. They are also available in the Assistive Technology Service in Hartley library.

TextHELP Read and Write Gold

This text-to-speech software can be a useful proof-reading aid for your own work. It has spelling and grammar tools. By interfacing with a scanner it can create text files of both printed and electronic materials which you can then listen to. Its features also include a speech maker which will convert text into mp3 audio files.

EndNote

This a powerful bibliographic referencing tool. It creates a personal 'library' of all your reference sources and greatly aids organisation of learning and background materials. When connected to MS Word 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.

Instructions for using these programs are available via the Assistive Technology Service website: www.ats.soton.ac.uk Follow links to 'software guides'.

If you have been awarded assistive software you are strongly advised to book individual **training** with the Wessex Needs Assessment Centre (previously CELT).

Lexdis

If you enjoy using technology www.lexdis.org/ has many creative ideas from students about how to work, learn and revise.

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 Services 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 for more information.

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 **1-1 tutorial 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.