Welcome
Welcome to the third in a series of newsletters produced by HSMC library staff on the topic of study skills. This is a general guide so if you are unsure of anything please check with staff.

Before you read further you might want to look at our study skills collection in the library – which includes titles from the Pocket Study Skills and Palgrave Study Skills series:

**Introduction**

Reading, writing, and making notes may sound like pretty basic concepts, but they also form the foundations of university study – so it’s important you get it right! This newsletter hopes to address some of the ways you can read purposefully (what to read, using reading lists, how to read the text), note take effectively (why it matters and how) and add clarity to your writing (punctuation, structure and style). We’ll also include a few general hints and tips at the end and list other resources that we think you might find useful – including where to get further help.

**Reading**

or what to read, why you should use reading lists and how to read the text

What to read

Firstly refer to your assignment title and try and extract what it is you need to cover – don’t make the mistake of reading the title too quickly or assuming you know what it means and then plunging into unfocused reading. Over the page is an example of how you might approach this – pay particular heed to subject words and process words.
In this example the subject word is ‘global monoculture’ and the process word ‘evaluate’ – the latter indicates the depth of research needed. This and other examples and their explanations can be found below:

**ANALYSE**: “look at the concepts and ideas under discussion in depth…”

**COMMENT**: “show you understand the topic, give your view and provide examples…”

**EVALUATE**: “weigh up the arguments surrounding an issue, using your own opinions and, more importantly, reference to the work of others…”

**OUTLINE**: “give the main features of...”

**REFLECT**: “examine an experience and look back at how you reacted, what went well or not so well and what you might have done differently…”

**STATE**: “present in a clear, concise form…”

Once you have analyzed your assignment or essay title you should be clearer on exactly what you need to read – generally you will be expected to use your reading list (more on this later) as well as your own selection of sources – use your subject word to help you.

**Sorts of resources you might use:**

- **introduction textbooks**
- **key or seminal texts**
- **recent academic articles**
- **Items on the reading list**

**Why you should use reading lists**

Once you have a clear understanding of the assignment or essay title you can approach your reading list (you can find these on CANVAS) in a meaningful way and prioritize what you want to read.

**A few things to remember...**

1) There may be titles that cover similar topics – so don’t feel you have to read them all

2) Discuss sources with your fellow students – is there anything they would recommend?

3) If the book you need is out on loan remember you can reserve it – just ask in the library for details
4) If there are any gaps – e.g. the reading list doesn’t address the essay question directly try conducting your own search. Use the HSMC library and Main Library catalogues to do this.

How to read the text

According to the University of Manchester∗ “…the most important thing to do is not feel overwhelmed by the material.” Selecting your reading material wisely and keeping your purpose in mind as you read (as per previous sections of this newsletter) should help to address this.

However you can also avoid this by using different reading styles:

Reading style 1

Scan the material – this means looking over it fairly quickly to pick out specific words, phrases or issues. This is really useful if you are reviewing search results from an online catalogue or search engine.

Reading style 2

Skim the material – get the general ‘feel’ of the text by reading headings, introductions or conclusions. This is useful if you are deciding whether to read the text in more detail.

Reading style 3

Read the text in depth – this is detailed reading of a text and should allow you to closely understand the topic, detail or argument.

Some other useful tips...

Read actively

Become actively involved with your reading by questioning and disagreeing with the author and visualising concepts, if this helps. Note down your ideas as you go along.

Review the information

At the end of each reading section, stop to answer the original questions you set yourself. Consider:

- Has the passage answered all my questions?
- Are there some parts I need to re-read?
- Are there some areas that will require further research?
- Are my notes adequate? Will I understand them at a later date?

Remember - reading effectively is more important than simply reading quickly.

Making Notes or why you should make notes and how to make them. Also a note on referencing and plagiarism.

Why you should make notes

The physical process of writing notes allows your brain to absorb information and make connections. Making your own notes also allows you to start on the process of using your own words and style, gives a unique record of the text (in your own words), helps you to concentrate and ultimately should allow you to attain better marks.

∗ for more details see http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/study/skills/essentials/writing/planning.html
“...if you don’t make notes...you will find it harder to develop your own independent understanding.”

How to make notes

There are lots of different ways to make notes – but here are a few to consider:

Skeleton Prose

The most common form of note taking. Notes are structured as a sequence of points and paragraphs, possibly with headings and indentations - a little like an essay plan. This is useful for those books/articles where arguments are static and built up slowly and sequentially.

Cornell Note Taking System

This method of note taking was devised for students at Cornell University in the USA and is a structured, common-sense way of ensuring that you take clear notes, engage with them actively, and have clear material from which to revise.

Spidergrams or Mind Mapping

A system of connecting ideas in a diagrammatical, non-linear form. To create a mind map, start in the centre of a page with an idea or heading representing your main idea or central theme. You then create branches out from the central idea, each branch representing a sub-theme. Each sub-theme can then be subdivided, as appropriate.

Which style you use will depend on your personal preferences and the situation and purpose of your note taking.

Referencing and Plagiarism

** Another reason for taking decent (accurate, concise) notes is to avoid plagiarising someone’s work. Taking notes as you go along – making sure to record Author, Title, Date, Place of Publication and Publisher – also makes referencing easier. This is essential – for more details and advice please see your student handbook or our newsletter on Referencing and Plagiarism.

Writing your Essay including punctuation, structure and style

Punctuation

Good punctuation and grammar will not only improve your marks, but, used skillfully, can make your arguments more persuasive and engaging. The following section looks at the most common punctuation marks used in English:

- **Colon:** The colon can be used after a complete statement to introduce something that explains, illustrates or reinforces that statement. It can also be used to introduce a list.

Example

“...several teams were promoted last season: Southampton, Everton and Crewe.”
Comma: The comma can be used to separate items in a list, to mark off a phrase at the beginning, middle or end of a sentence, before certain conjunctions (but, for, yet etc) in a sentence and to separate parenthetical elements in a sentence (also known as an aside).

Examples:
“…my favorite colours are red, brown, purple and blue.”
“…he was a great cook, but would never be as good as his mother in law.”
“The pyramids, one of the wonders of the ancient world, lie just outside Cairo.”

Apostrophe: The apostrophe is used to indicate that a letter or letters has/have been removed. So It is become it’s, I am becomes I’m etc. A possessive apostrophe comes directly after the owner of an object, concept or thing.

Examples:
“She’s leaving home.”
“Roberts’s house is always tidy.”

For more information on punctuation you might want to refer to Brilliant Writing Tips for Students, which includes sections on all of the above as well as the comma splice, hyphenation and semicolons.

Structure
According to the University of Leicester*
“…sentences provide us with the framework for the clear written expression of our ideas. The aim in writing is always to write in complete sentences which are correctly punctuated. Sentences always begin with a capital letter and end in either a full stop, exclamation or question mark. A complete sentence always contains a verb, expresses a complete idea and makes sense standing alone.”

Clauses are groups of words that express a single idea. There are two types of clauses: independent clauses and dependent clauses. Independent clauses can stand alone as complete sentences. A dependent clause needs an independent clause to complete its meaning.

Sentences can be simple: consisting of one independent clause and one punctuation mark at the end, compound: joined simple sentences with a comma or a word like ‘and’ or complex: a combination of an independent clause with a dependent clause.

Examples:
Simple: “The bus was late.”
Compound: “The bus was late, so she missed her appointment.”
Complex: “She missed her appointment because her bus was late arriving.”

* for more details see http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/grammar/grammar-guides/sentence
Style
Writing in an ‘academic style’ generally means you should avoid informal language, especially colloquial expressions and slang. Sentences should be complete and ideas arranged into paragraphs or sections, and you should aim for perfection in your grammar and spelling. Also remember if you are talking about someone else’s ideas you will need to reference them accurately.

FORMAL
- Avoid shortened forms
- Avoid popular phrases or clichés
- Avoid casual everyday words such as really, okay, maybe

PRECISE
- Stick within the word count
- Check your spelling

STRUCTURED
- Make sure you write in complete sentences
- Divide your writing up into paragraphs

CAUSIOUS
- avoid overuse of first person pronouns (I, we, my, our)
- use verbs such as would, could, may, might which ‘soften’ what you’re saying
- avoid making overgeneralisations

DON’T forget to reference your work!!

Resources
Provided by the Main Library:

- **Skills4Study campus**
  High-quality interactive materials on all aspects of study to help you enhance your skills in areas such as Reading and Note taking, Critical Thinking, Exam Skills.

  See the UofB website for more details

- **PASS**
  The University of Birmingham Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) scheme can help you adjust to University life, improve your study habits and enhance your understanding of the subject matter in your course

Remember we also hold a series of study skills books in the HSMC library – if you would like to know more please speak to library staff.

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/hsmc_library](http://www.twitter.com/hsmc_library)

Address: HSMC Library & Information Service, Park House, 40 Edgbaston Park Road, Birmingham, B15 2RT

Email: hsmc-library@contacts.bham.ac.uk

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