**TLC PODCASTS: Making effective notes from your reading**

In the previous podcast, we focussed our attention on taking an active approach to selecting and exploring the texts. In this podcast I’d like to consider making notes from readings. If you’ve been exploring texts in different “phases” as discussed earlier, you already have some basic notes about the texts. There is a worksheet available with the podcast on reading for academic purposes (Monday) to guide you through these preliminary phases.

Today, we’ll talk about the notes you make that help you understand the text and discover your own views. Remember that the goal of academic reading is not so much to be able to say what an author said, but to prepare yourself to evaluate, compare, and apply various authors’ ideas.

**½ of your time reading, ½ of your time writing!**

If you equate reading primarily with looking at text, it may come as a surprise - but I would like to suggest that academic reading is an activity where you use about half of your time with your “eyes on the page” and half of your time writing. In an hour spent with a text, you might spend up to 30 minutes making notes. Ten minutes at the beginning, 5 minutes here, 5 minutes there – writing your reading goals, your expectations, your interpretation, and your questions related to the article.

If you believe reading a text means reading it all, in the order the author wrote it, in one sitting, I’d like to suggest a different idea. After an initial hour spent with a text, let’s say you decide to dedicate another hour to the same reading the next day. In addition to the text itself, you also have another resource for your reading - the notes from the previous reading session! By making useful reading notes and taking extra time for reflection, you are better prepared to approach texts critically. That is, you are better able to evaluate the position taken in the text, formulate your views on the author’s reasoning, the strength of the evidence presented, and the conclusions the author draws.

Remember, you’re principal job is not to record facts presented in texts, but to be able to evaluate and critique approaches to any given issue or problem, which are developed in texts. Ultimately, you are expected to use texts to prepare yourself to develop your own position, to be able to appreciate the differences in approaches or definitions, and decide which approach best suits your purposes.

With this in mind, realise that the notes you make from your reading are very important. Here we’ll talk about two aspects of making effective reading notes: managing information and developing the content of your notes

**Managing information**

One facet of note-making is a matter of managing information. The articles and books your read are the tools of your academic “trade” and keeping a clear record of the ideas you discover is an important part of your academic work. Suppose you review five or six texts per week. By the end of Michaelmas Term alone, you’ve got more than 50 main arguments to keep track of! Documenting your reading carefully will help you consider the body of academic work you discover in a orderly way, which authors and theories “go together”, which ones are opposed to each other, etc. Keeping clear notes will also help you when it comes time to write or revise. You should have the main idea from each text, your interpretation of it and everything you need to find the reading again, or to cite the reading and create a bibliography entry. In addition to helping you keep track of all the ideas you’ve discovered and developed in your course, this is one of best ways to avoid plagiarism. You can use any system you like for managing all this information – hard copies of notes on paper, index cards, lists in an electronic document, a database that you create, or software like EndNote, Mendeley, Zotero, etc. The important thing is to begin managing this information from the beginning.

**What are you writing?**

Another facet of making effective notes is what your notes actually contain. If you have your own hard copy of the text, notes or symbols (stars, question marks, etc.) in the margins are fine. Highlighting can be helpful, too. If you do use a highlighter pen, check what you are highlighting. Are you highlighting key terms or quotations that are particularly incisive or eloquent, that you might use in an essay? Or are you leaving trails and blocks of fluorescent ink simply as “evidence” that you “read” that part? If you find that a more than a third of your text is highlighted, this could be a sign that you are reading superficially. Highlighting, underlining, and margin notes can be useful, but they cannot take the place of your own thoughts about the article on a separate page, though.

What should go into these notes is up to you! But I have a few suggestions. For the next few minutes, I’ll be referring to the worksheet that is available alongside the link to this podcast. You may want to have a look at this worksheet now.

On a separate sheet of paper or electronic document, you should make notes on a few important elements. **First, record the bibliographical information** about the text you are reading - the author, year of publication, publisher, page numbers and anything else you need to cite the text, according the reference style you are using. The idea is that you needn’t go back to search for these details in case you decide to use this material in a paper. Also, if you do need to find the text again, you know exactly where to find it.

Next, Note anything you know or can infer about the **author’s theoretical orientation**. This might be a particular intellectual movement or “school of thought” associated with the author. You will be discovering the ideas of many thinkers and it is important to develop an understanding of how these ideas relate to each other. In making your notes, think back to other readings, and consider who would AGREE with this writer’s ideas? Who would DISAGREE?

The next item on the worksheet is **“background or context**” and this might be the course or lecture topic that the text relates to, who recommended it to you, or how you found this text. For example, it is often the case that you explore a text because an author refers to in an initial text. Once you have notes for dozens of readings, it can be helpful to think back to how you came to read a text in the first place.

The **author’s thesis is a**n important part of your notes where you make a clear, concise statement of the author’s main argument. Here, identify the main idea this author is trying to convince you of. It is important to write this – in just a sentence or two – in your own words. If you feel that you must copy the main argument word for word and that you are not able to formulate it in your own way, it may be that you don’t understand it.

The **conclusion** is likely to be closely related to the main argument you have just identified. Given the author’s thesis, what is his or her “bottom line”? Sometimes, there is a theoretical or practical conclusion to be drawn from the argument.

I’d like to draw your special attention to the last three items on the note-making worksheet. You’ve already identified and written in your own words the main point of the text. Part of the notes you make should address the “**reasoning and evidence to justify and support the argument”.** Here, try to write in your own words how the author supports this argument. What reasons are given in support of the main point? What evidence is provided?

Being able to identify how an argument is made is a very important part of reading. Remember that taking a critical approach to learning involves taking nothing for granted. This means being able to trace the “steps” authors take in making their points.

The last two parts of the worksheet, are perhaps the most important elements of your notes. These are the **strengths** and **weaknesses** of the author’s argument. How convinced are you by the evidence you have just identified. Does the author’s argument flow logically? Is there particularly current or compelling empirical evidence? Does the argument build on other work? Or are there omissions in the evidence?

Consider also how the ideas in one text complement or contradict ideas in other texts that you have read. These last two parts require you to take a position on the texts you read, to have your own “critical voice”. Evaluating others’ work in this way is one of the most challenging aspects of academic reading and note-making. It is also, perhaps, one of the most useful aspects – particularly with respect to academic writing, as we’ll see in tomorrow’s podcast. It doesn’t always come easily, but with practice, you will become more at ease and skilled at this critical thinking skill.

**Finally…**

There are two key points to consider in making these notes. The first is to make notes using your own words. Don’t simply copy from the text. Copying takes time and “seems” like work; but in fact it is entirely possible to copy text without understanding what it means or what you think about it.

The second important point is to write at least as much (if not more!) about what you think of the text compared to the notes you make on what the author “says”. Understanding how the ideas presented in the text fit in with the rest of your understanding about the topic, and making observations on the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas presented text are the tasks that you are aiming to achieve. Don’t trick yourself into believing that a long, descriptive record of the details of what the author said is the same as understanding the text.

We’ve gone over some of the questions you can focus on as you reflect and make notes on readings. If you have questions about reading and making notes, don’t hesitate to get in touch with your academic adviser in your department. You can also raise these questions during reading seminars – that is what they are for! You can also get in touch with us here at the Teaching and Learning Centre. Also, keep an eye out for our central events and workshops on reading and other study skills throughout the year.

Starting tomorrow, in the next podcast, we’ll start talking about academic writing. Thanks for listening!