

5

EFFECTIVE READING

I read about the hazards of typhoons. I was so frightened, I gave up reading.

You are 'reading' for a geography degree, so it is not surprising that most time at university should(!) be spent with a book or journal or handout. Everyone reads; the knack is to read and learn at the same time so your reading time is well used. You may need to read quickly because library loan periods are short. This chapter discusses some reading techniques, asks you to reflect on and evaluate what you know, and consider what you might do in future! As with playing the trombone, practise is required. There is a vast amount of information to grapple with in a geography degree. Reading, thinking and note-making are totally interlinked activities, but this chapter concentrates on the reading element.

5.1 READING LISTS

Inconveniently, most geography lecturers sort reading lists alphabetically by module, but you need them sorted by library and library floor location. Either use highlighter pen to indicate what is in which library, and take advantage of the nearest library shelf when time is limited, or make a list of the journal articles/book chapters/papers you want to read each week. Now code it by library and by floor rather than by module (see Figure 5:1). This list needs to be twice as long as you can reasonably do in a week, so if a book is missing there are alternatives.

Library reading this week				
Author	Journal/Title	Shelf mark	Module	Library/Floor
Hale, J.S. and Gamm, A. 2001	Introduction to Geomorphology	987.65	Tropical Geomorphology	Floor 6 Science Lib.
Orlitzky, Purvis, and Hunt 2001	Public Understanding of Science, 10, 187-211	656.2	Climate change	Floor 5 Hist Sci Lib

Figure 5.1 Library list sorter

Top Tip

Carry reading lists at all times.

Reading lists are often dauntingly long, but you are not, usually, expected to read everything. Long lists give you choice in research topics and, especially where class sizes are large and books restricted, lots of options. Serendipity cheers the brain. If a book is on loan, don't give up. There are probably three equally good texts on the same topic with the same library class number. Reading something is more helpful than reading nothing, and RECALL essential texts.

Students tend to request a module text and feel uncomfortable when a tutor says 'there is no set text'. Even when there is one, it is rarely followed in detail. Reading a recommended book is a good idea, but watch out for those points where a lecturer disagrees with the text. Perhaps the author got it wrong, or our understanding of a topic has moved forward or ideas have changed. You do not have to buy all the set texts: use the library or consider buying as a group and sharing. Watch the noticeboards for second-hand sales.

Find and use
examples that were
not in the lecture

Reading in support of lecture modules is the obvious thing to do, but 'Do you read for computing, statistics and laboratory classes too?' Certainly the volume of reading expected for practical modules is less than for lecture modules, but zero reading is not right. Class activities tend to stress the practical, hands-on elements, BUT you should still allocate time for reading, to understand where practical activities fit with the art of geography. If you don't make the connection between practicals and their geographical applications in levels 1 and 2, you are unlikely to utilize techniques to best effect in projects and dissertations.

Top Tip

READ FOR ALL MODULES!

Photocopying is no substitute for reading – but it feels really, really good.

5.2 READING TECHNIQUES

There is a mega temptation to sit down in a comfy chair with a coffee and to start reading a book at page 1. **THIS IS A VERY BAD IDEA.** With many academic texts, by page 4, you will have cleaned the cat litter tray, done a house full of washing, mended a motor bike, fallen asleep or all four and more. This is great for the state of the house, but a learning disaster.

Everyone uses a range of reading techniques, speed-reading of novels, skip-reading headlines; the style depends on purpose. As you look through this section, reflect on where you use each technique already. For effective study, adopt the 'deep study' approach.

Deep study reading

Deep study reading is vital when you want to make connections, understand meanings, consider implications and evaluate arguments. Reading deeply needs a strategic approach and time to cogitate. Rowntree (1988) describes an active reading method known as SQ3R, which promotes deeper, more thoughtful reading. It is summarized in **Try This 5.1**. SQ3R is an acronym for Survey – Question – Read – Recall – Review. Give **Try This 5.1** a go; it may seem long-winded at first, but it is worth pursuing, because it links thinking with reading in a flexible manner. It stops you rushing into unproductive note-making. You can use SQ3R with books and articles, and for summarizing notes during revision. You are likely to recall more by using a questioning and 'mental discussion' approach to reading. Having thought about SQ3R with books, use **Try This 5.2**.

Browsing

Browsing is an important research activity, used to search for information that is related and tangential to widen your knowledge. In essence it involves giving a broader context or view of the subject, which in turn provides you with a stronger base to add to with directed or specific reading. Browsing might involve checking out popular social science, history, science and introductory texts. Good sources of general and topical geographical information include *The Economist*, *New Scientist*, *New Internationalist* and the country and investment focus supplements in *The Guardian* and *Financial Times*. Browsing enables you to build up a sense of how geography as a whole, or particular parts of the subject, fit together. Becoming immersed in the language and experience of the topic encourages you to think geographically.

Scanning

Scan when you want a specific item of information. Scan the contents page or index, letting your eyes rove around to spot key words and phrases. Chase up the references and then, carefully, read the points that are relevant for you.

TRY THIS 5.1 – SQ3R

SQ3R is a template for reading and thinking. Try it on the next book you pick up.

Survey: Look at the whole text before you get into parts in detail. Start with the cover. Is this a respected author? When was it written? Is it dated?

Use the contents and chapter headings and subheadings to get an idea of the whole book and to locate the sections that are of interest to you. First and last paragraphs should highlight arguments and key points.

Question: You will recall more if you know why you are reading, so ask yourself some questions. Review your present knowledge, and then ask what else you want/need to know. Questions like: What is new in this reading? What can I add from this book? Where does this fit in this course, other modules? Is this a supporting/refuting/contradictory piece of information?

Having previewed the book and developed your reasons for reading, you can also decide whether deep reading and note-making is required, or whether scanning and some additions to previous notes will suffice.

Read: This is the stage to start reading, but not necessarily from page 1, read the sections that are relevant for you and your present assignment. Read attentively but also critically. The first time you read you cannot get hold of all points and ideas.

On first reading: Locate the main ideas. Get the general structure and subject content in your head. *Do not make notes during this first reading*; the detail gets in the way.

On second reading: Chase up the detailed bits that you need for essays. Highlight or make notes of all essential points.

Recall: Do you understand what you have read? Give yourself a break, and then have a think about what you remember and what you understand. This process makes you an active, learning reader. Ask yourself questions like: Can I explain this idea in my own words? Can I recall the key points without rereading the original text?

Review: Now go back to the text and check the accuracy of your recall! Reviewing should tell you how much you have really absorbed. Review your steps and check main points.

Are the headings and summaries first noted the right ones. Do they need revising? Do new questions about the material arise now that you have gone through in detail? Have you missed anything important? Do you need more detail or examples? Fill in gaps and correct errors in your notes. Ask where your views fit with those of the authors. Do you agree/disagree?

The last question is: Am I happy to give this book back to the library?

Skimming

Skim-read to get a quick impression or general overview of a book or article. Look for 'signposts': chapter headings, subheadings, lists, figures; read first and last paragraphs/first and last sentences of a paragraph. Make a note of key words, phrases and points to summarize the main themes; but this is still not the same as detailed, deep reading.

TRY THIS 5.2 – SQ3R for papers

How do you adapt SQ3R to read a journal article? Work out a five-point plan and try it on the next article you read.

Photoreading

One of many scanning techniques, Scheele (1993) describes a 'photoreading' method that again requires you to identify your aims before scan-reading, and mentally and physically filing the contents. When reading, ask yourself:

- Is this making me think?
- Am I getting a better grasp of the subject material?

If the answer is no, then maybe you need to read something else or employ a different technique. Reading is about being selective, and it is an iterative activity. Cross-checking between articles, notes and more articles, looking back to be sure you understand the point and chasing up other points of view are all parts of the process. Breaking for coffee is OK and necessary! Talking to friends will assist in putting reading in perspective. Have a go at **Try This 5.3**.

TRY THIS 5.3 – Where do you read?

Where do you do different types of reading? Are you someone who needs pen and paper in hand to read and learn effectively? Three student reflections on the first question are on p 270. Have quick look if you find reflecting on this difficult.

Academic journal articles and books are not racy thrillers. There should be a rational, logical argument, but rarely an exciting narrative. Usually, authors state their case and then explain the position, or argument, using careful reasoning. The writer should persuade the reader (you) of the merit of the case in an unemotional and independent manner. Academic writing is rarely overtly friendly or jolly in tone. You may well feel that the writer is completely wrong. You may disagree with the case presented. If so, do not 'bin the book'; make a list of your disagreements and build up your case for the opposition. If you agree with the author, list the supporting evidence and case examples.

Get used to spotting cues or signposts to guide you to important points and the structure, phrases like: 'The background indicates...', 'the results show...', 'to summarize...' or see **Try This 5.4** to find further examples.

TRY THIS 5.4 – Spotting reading cues

Look through the book or article you are reading for geography at present, and pick out the cue words and phrases. There are examples on p 270.

5.3 HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO READ?

What do I know already?

Reading and note-making will be more focussed if you first consider what you already know, and use this information to decide where reading can effectively fill the gaps. Use a flow or spider diagram (Figure 8:1, Figure 12:1) to sort ideas. Put boxes around information you have already, circle areas which will benefit from more detail, check the reference list for documents to fill the gaps, and add them to the diagram. Then prioritize the circles and references, 1 to n , making sure you have an even spread of support material for the different issues. Coding and questioning encourages critical assessments and assists in 'what to do next' decisions.

Be critical of the literature

Before starting, make a list of main ideas or theories. While searching, mark the ideas that are new to you with asterisks, tick those which reinforce lecture material, and highlight ideas to follow up in more detail.

Questions to ask include:

- Is this idea up to date?
- Are there more recent ideas ?
- Do the graphs make sense?
- Are the statistics right and appropriate?
- Did the writer have a particular perspective that led to a bias in writing?
- Why did the authors research this area? Does their methodology influence the results in a manner that might affect the interpretation?

Library, author and journal searches start the process and practice allows you to judge the relative value of different documents. After reading, look at the author and key-word list again. Do you need to change it? Exploring diverse sources will

develop your research skills. Reading and quoting sources in addition to those on the reading list may seriously impress an examiner.

Narrow Reading → predictable essays and reports → middling marks

Wide Reading → more creative, less predictable responses → higher marks (usually)

It does not usually matter what you read, or in what order. Read something.

How long to read for?

For most people, two hours is long enough to concentrate on one topic. A short article from *New Scientist* or *The Economist* should take less, but some reading takes longer. With longer documents you need a reading strategy, and you need to take breaks. Use breaks to reconsider the SQ elements of SQ3R and decide whether your reading plan needs amending. If you cannot get involved with a text then it is possibly because you cannot get to grips with the point of the writing, or do not know why you should be interested. So STOP READING and skim the chapter headings, skim your notes, refresh your brain on WHY you are reading and what you want to get out of it.

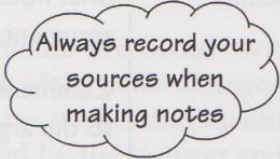
6

MAKING EFFECTIVE NOTES

I made a mental note, but I've forgotten where I put it.

There is a mass of geographical information whizzing around in radio, video and TV reports, specialist documentaries, lectures, tutorials, discussion groups and a lot of written material, including books, journals and newspapers. BUT, just because an article is in an academic journal, in the library, or on a reading list, does not make it a 'note-worthy' event. Making notes is time consuming, and ineffective if done on autopilot with the brain half engaged. Note-making that lets you learn requires your brain to be fully involved in asking questions and commenting on the ideas. Noting is not just about getting the facts down, it is also about identifying links between different pieces of information, contradictions and examples. Notes should record information in your own words, evaluate different points of view, and encourage the development of your own ideas and opinions. Note-taking is a multipurpose activity; like snowboarding, it gets easier with practice. Good questions to ask when making notes include: 'Is this making me think?' or 'Am I getting a clearer understanding of the topic?'

Many people start reading and making notes without any sort of preview. A **BAD IDEA**. They make pages of notes from the opening section and few, if any, from later in the document. The first pages of a book usually set the scene. Notes may only be needed from conclusion and discussion sections. Sometimes detailed notes are required, but sometimes key words, definitions and brief summaries are fine. Use **Try This 6.1** to evaluate how the style and length of your note-making should change given different types of information, and consider how the SQ3R method (see p 50) fits in to your note-making process. Then look at **Try This 6.2** and reflect on what do you do already. What could you do in future?



Always record your sources when making notes

TRY THIS 6.1 – Styles of note-making

What styles of notes are needed for these different types of information? There are a couple of answers to kick-start your ideas (after Kneale 1998).

Academic content	Style of notes
Significant article but it repeats the content of the lecture.	None, it is in the lecture notes, BUT check your notes and diagrams are accurate. Did you note relevant sources, authors?
Fundamental background theory, partly covered in the lecture.	
An argument in favour of point x.	
An argument that contradicts the main point.	
An example from an odd situation where the general theory breaks down.	
A critically important case study.	
Just another case study.	
Interesting but off-the-point article.	A sentence at most! HOWEVER , add a cross-reference in case it might be useful elsewhere.
An unexpected insight from a different angle.	
An example/argument you agree with.	
An argument you think is unsound.	Brief notes of the alternative line of argument, refs and case example. Comment on why it does not work so the argument makes sense to you at revision.
A superficial consideration of a big topic.	
A very detailed insight into a problem.	

TRY THIS 6.2 – How do you make notes?

Look at this unordered jumble of note-making activities and ✓ those likely to assist learning, and put a ✗ against those likely to slow up learning. What do you do already? Are there some ideas here that are worth adopting in the future?

Leave wide margins	Ignore handouts
Identify what is not said	Code references to follow up
Compare and revise notes with friends	Store notes under washing
Do loads of photocopying	Copy big chunks from books
Underline main points	Always note references in full
Use the library for socializing	Make notes from current affairs programmes
Doodle	Make short notes of main points and headings
Turn complex ideas into flow charts	Use cards for notes
Ask lecturers about points that make no sense	Order and file notes weekly
Ask questions	Jot down personal ideas
Highlight main points	Share notes with friends
Natter in lectures	Write illegibly
Copy all OHTs	Use coloured pens for different points
Scribble extra questions in margins	Write shopping lists in lectures
Write down everything said in lectures	Annotate handouts
Take notes from TV documentaries	Revise notes within three days of lectures

6.1 MAKING NOTES FROM PRESENTATIONS

Geography lectures and seminars are awash with information, so memory meltdown syndrome will loom. Make notes of important points; you cannot hope to note everything. Listen to case studies and identify complementary examples. Highlight references mentioned by the lecturer and keep a tally of new words. Your primary goal in presentations should be to participate actively, thinking around the subject material, not to record a perfect transcript of the proceedings. Get the gist and essentials down in your own words.

Lecture notes made at speed, in the darkness of a lecture theatre, are often scrappy, illegible and usually have something missing. If you put notes away at once, you may not be able to make sense of them later. Try to summarize and

clarify notes within a day of the lecture. This reinforces ideas in your memory, hopefully stimulates further thoughts, and suggests reading priorities.

6.2 MAKING NOTES FROM DOCUMENTS

Noting from documents is easier than from lectures, because there is time to think about the issues, identify links to other material and write legibly the first time. You can read awkward passages again, but risk writing too much. Copying whole passages postpones the hard work of thinking through the material and thereby wastes time and paper. Summarizing is a skill that develops practice. Give **Try This 6.3** a go next time you read a journal article; it won't work for all articles but is a start to structuring note-making.

TRY THIS 6.3 – Tackling journal articles

Use this as a guide when reading a journal article or chapter (from Kneale 1998).

- 1 First read the article
- 2 Write down the reference in full and the library location so you can find it again.
- 3 Summarize the contents in two sentences.
- 4 Summarize in one sentence the main conclusion.
- 5 What are the strong points of the article?
- 6 Is this an argument/case I can agree with?
- 7 How does this information fit with my current knowledge?
- 8 What else do I read to develop my understanding of this topic?

Think about where you will use your information. Scanning can save time if it avoids you making notes on an irrelevant article or one that repeats information you have already. In the latter case, a two-line note may be enough, e.g.

'Withyoualltheway (2010) supports Originality's (2005) hypothesis with his results from a comparable study of the ecology of lemmings'

or

'Dissenting arguments are presented by Dontlikeit (2010) and Notonyournellie (2010) who made independent, detailed analyses of groundwater data to define the extent of landfill leakage. Dontlikeit's main points are...'

or

'Wellcushioned (2010) studying 27 retail furniture outlets in Somerset and Virginia, showed price fixing to be widespread. His results contrast with those of Ididitmyway's (2010) report on prices in Bangkok, because...'

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The fuller note may accrue additional marks in an essay or exam. You do not have long to impress an examiner. An essay with one case study as evidence is likely to do less well than one which covers a range of examples or cases, albeit more briefly, PROVIDED THEY ARE RELEVANT. Make notes accordingly.

Top Tips

- **New words** Almost every geography module has its specialist vocabulary. Keep a record of new words and check the spelling! The trick is to practise using the 'jargon of the subject' or 'geography-speak'. Get familiar with the use of words like decentralization, racialization, hysteresis, and bypassing. If you are happy with geographical terminology, you will use it effectively.
- **How long?** 'How long should my notes be?' is a regular student query, and the answer relates to lengths of string. The length of notes depends on your purpose. Generally, if notes occupy more than 1 side of A4, or 1–5 per cent of the text length, the topic must be of crucial importance. Some tutors will have apoplexy over the last statement: of course, there are cases where notes will be longer, but aiming for brevity is a good notion. **Try This 6.1** gave some guidelines.
- **Sources** Keep an accurate record of all research sources and see Chapter 14 for advice on how to cite references.
- **Quotations** A direct quotation can add substance and impact in writing, but must be timely, relevant and fully integrated; always ensure quotations are fully referenced (Chapter 14; Mills 1994). A quote should be the only time when your notes exactly copy the text. Reproducing maps or diagrams is a form of quotation and again the source must be acknowledged. If you rework secondary or tertiary data in a figure, table, graph or map, acknowledge the source as in '*See figure x from Mappit et al. (2010)*'; '*The data in Table y (taken from Plottit 1991) shows that. . .*'; '*Re-plotting the data (Graffit 2010) shows. . . (Figure z)*'.
- **Plagiarism** If you do not fully acknowledge your sources, then the university may impose penalties, which can range from loss of marks to dismissal from a course. The regulations and penalties for plagiarism will be somewhere in your university handbook, something like:

Any work submitted as part of any university assessment must be the student's own work. Any material quoted from other authors, must be placed in quotation marks and full reference made to the original authors.

If you copy directly during note-making, you run the risk of memorizing and repeating the material in an essay. It is therefore vital to adopt good note-making habits to avoid plagiarism. Read and think about ideas and main points, then make notes from your head, using your own language. Find new ways to express ideas. This is not as difficult as it seems, but practise helps. The

original author wrote for a specific reason, but your reason and context for making notes is different. Keep asking questions and look for links to other references and modules. Notes should grab your attention, and make sense to you ten weeks later. They may be longer or shorter than the original, but paraphrased in your language. Just swapping a couple of words is not enough.

- **Diagrams** Using flow or spider diagrams as a first step in note-making reduces the possibility of plagiarism. The style and language of the original author disappears behind a web of key words and connecting arrows.
- **Check and share notes with friends** Everyone has different ideas about what is important, so comparing summary notes with a mate will expand your understanding.

6.3 TECHNIQUES

Note-making is an activity where everyone has his or her own style. Aim to keep things simple, or you will take more time remembering your system than learning geography.

Which medium?

Hang on while I staple this note to my floppy disk.

- Cards encourage you to condense material or use small writing. Shuffle and resort them for essays, presentations and revision.
- Loose-leaf paper lets you file pages at the relevant point and move pages around, which is especially useful when you find inter-module connections.
- Notebooks keep everything together, but leave spaces to add new information, comments and make links. Index the pages so you can find bits!
- PCs and electronic organizers allow notes to be typed straight to disk. This saves time later, especially with cutting and pasting references.

Multicoloured highlighting

Saunders (1994) suggests a colour code to highlight different types of information on *your own* notes, books and photocopies. He suggests: 'yellow for key information and definitions; green for facts and figures worth learning; pink for principal ideas and links between things; blue for things you want to find out more about. . .' This approach requires lots of highlighter pens and consistency in their use, but it can be particularly useful when scanning your own documents. If this looks too complicated, use one highlighter pen – sparingly. On a PC, changing the font colour or shading will do the same task.

Coding

Coding notes assists in dissecting structure and picking out essential points. During revision, the act of classifying your notes stimulates thoughts about the types and relative importance of information. At its simplest, use a ** system in the margin:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| **** Vital | ** Useful |
| ?* Possible | ↓ A good idea but not for this, cross-reference to . . . |

A more complex margin system distinguishes different types of information:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| Main argument | B Background or introduction |
| Secondary argument | S Summary |
| E.G. Case study | I Irrelevant |
| [Methodology, techniques | !! Brilliant, must remember |
| R Reservations, the 'Yes, but' thoughts | |
| ? Not sure about this, need to look at . . . to check it out. | |

Opinions

Note your own thoughts and opinions as you work. These are vital, BUT make sure you know which are notes from sources, and which your own opinions and comments. You could use two pens, one for text notes and the other for personal comments. Ask yourself questions like: 'What does this mean?' 'Is this conclusion fully justified?' 'Do I agree with the inferences drawn?' 'What has the researcher proved?' 'What is s/he guessing?' 'How do these results fit with what we knew before?' 'What are the implications for where we go next?'

Space

Leave spaces in notes, a wide margin or gaps, so there is room to add comments and opinions at another time. There is no time in lectures to pursue personal questions to a logical conclusion, but there is time when reviewing to refocus thoughts.

Abbreviations

Use abbreviations in notes but not essays, intro. for introduction; omitting vowels Glcⁿ for glaciation; Hist^l for historical or using symbols. You probably have a system already, but here are some suggestions:

- | | | | |
|---|----------|------------------|----------------------------|
| + | And | = | is the same as |
| → | Leads to | xxx ⁿ | xxxion as in precipitation |
| ↑ | Increase | xxx ^s | xxxing as in pumping |
| ↓ | Decrease | // | Between |

>	Greater than	Xpt	Except
<	Less than	←	Before
∴	Therefore	w/	With
?	Question	w/o	Without

Millions of unordered notes will take hours to create but will not necessarily promote learning. Aim for notes that are:

- ✓ clear, lively and limited in length.
- ✓ add knowledge and make connections to other material.
- ✓ include your own opinions and comments.
- ✓ searching and questioning.
- ✓ guiding or remind you what to do next.

Finally, feeling guilty because you haven't made some, or any, notes is a waste of time and energy.

6.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Most student skills texts talk in detail about note-making techniques.

Drew, S. and Bingham, R. (eds.) 2001 *The Student Skills Guide* (2nd edn), Gower, Aldershot.

Kneale, P.E. 1998 'Notes for Geography Students', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, Directions, 22, 3, 427-433.

Mills, C. 1994 'Acknowledging Sources in Written Assignments', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, Directions, 18, 2, 263-268.

Sanders, D. (ed) 1994 *The Complete Student Handbook*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Geolinks 2

By changing one letter at a time and keeping to real words, can you move between these terms? Answers on p 270.

M	E	R	E		B	E	C	K		C	O	V	E
W	I	N	D		T	A	R	N		D	E	L	L

Few p
that T
as a fa
not as
with
conve
Fordis
ecolog
stimul
Geo
thinki
judge
pursu
inform
practi
quest
and t
draw
A s
but it
some
cogni
assoc
devel



Figure