Reading Difficult Texts

Learning Enhancement Team
LET@mdx.ac.uk
Aims

— To identify the main challenges of reading difficult texts

— To consider a step-by-step approach that can make reading difficult texts a lot easier

— To apply the approach to a difficult text
Common Reactions

This is going to take me forever!!

I’ve read the first paragraph four times and I still don’t understand it!

I’ve got so many things to read and I can’t finish one chapter!
Step 1 of reading difficult texts: Don’t read the text!

Look at the text and ask yourself a series of Wh-? questions.

- What is it?
- Who wrote it?
- When was it written?
- Why was it written?
- Why am I being asked to read it?
Step 1 – Don’t read the text!

What is it?

• Is it a chapter from a book?
• Is it an article from a journal or magazine?
• Is it an interview?
• Is it a blog or on-line article?
Step 1 – don’t read the text!

Who wrote it?

Find the author’s/authors’ name/s in the text and ask yourself:

• Who are they? – professor, researcher, journalist?
• What is their field of study?
• What else have they written?
• Why might they have written something of interest to you? How will their area of specialism relate to your studies?
• What particular position or point of view might they hold?

You can use Google and Wikipedia to answer these questions
Step 1 – don’t read the text!

When was it written?

The publication date will be on the text somewhere. Ask yourself:

• Is it recent?
• Is it not so recent?
• If it was written a while ago, is it still relevant?
• What else was going on in that field at the time?
• Where does it sit in the writer’s research or output?
Step 1 – don’t read the text!

Why was it written?

- What issues does it address?
- Why is this important?
- Is it in response to some other research?
- Is it about an issue that is of concern to people in a particular (your!) field?
Step 1 – don’t read the text!

Why have you been asked to read it?

- The answer to the previous questions will give you the answer to this.
Step 2 – don’t read the text!

By now you will have some ideas about the content of the text.

Now read the title.

• What does it tell you about what the content might be?
Step 3 – don’t read the text!

Examine the text and ask yourself:

• How is it divided up?
• What sections does it contain?
• Is there an introduction and conclusion?
• Are there subheadings? Read them. What do you think they refer to? What does this tell you about the structure of the text? And about the content of each section?
Step 3 – don’t read the text!

Examine the text and ask yourself: How else is it arranged?

• Is there an abstract?
• Are there appendices?
• Are there footnotes?
• Are there notes in a separate section?
• How is the text printed on the page – in columns?
• What referencing system is being used?

This gives you confidence in knowing about the text before you try and read it. It makes you an active, engaged reader.
Step 4 – don’t read the text!

Is the text illustrated? Examine the illustrations.

• What are they? – pictures? diagrams? graphs? tables?
• Read the captions under them. What point is the writer illustrating?
• Look around the illustrations and see if there is a reference to them in the text. What does it say?
Step 5 – don’t read the text!

(Well, maybe just a little bit!)

Scan for bits of the text that look interesting/easy to read/have a topic that you recognise. Read sections and ask yourself:

• How do they relate to the main topic of the text?
Step 6 – don’t read the text!

(Well, maybe just a little bit more…)

• Read the introduction and the conclusion or beginning paragraphs and end paragraphs of the text.
• You could read the topic sentences and final sentences of some paragraphs.

When you do this, ask yourself:
• How does this fit in with what I already know about the text as a whole?
Reading is about Understanding

• Remember, you are trying to get an understanding of the writer’s point of view and the subject matter.
• You do not need to understand every word to understand a text.
Reading is about Confidence

*Remember:* 

- Never start reading the text until you have covered steps 1 – 6. 
- When you’ve done that, you’ll know enough about the text and its topic and content to contribute to a seminar discussion or select a section to quote in an essay. 
- You might never have to read the entire text at all!