How to read academic research quickly

When you're reading research, you don’t need to read everything you find from beginning to end. There are strategies you can use to help you to decide if something is useful, before you go on to read it in detail.

Books

Books are good for overviews of subject areas. They are usually not as specialist as journal articles, so they can be a simpler introduction to the main issues involved. You may find it helpful to look at a physical book in the following order:

- **Blurb**
  - The blurb or description on the back of the book to see what the aims are. The promotional blurb is trying to sell the book, so it will present it in a very positive light, but it can still be useful.

- **Table of contents**
  - Check the table of contents, near the front of the book, to see if there is a chapter on your topic.

- **Index**
  - At the back of the book, there should be an index of topics together with the relevant pages. As you look through this for your topic, check first the longer sections (eg 15-24), as sometimes individual page references will only talk about your topic in passing.

- **Introduction**
  - The introduction chapter is useful for presenting the scope of the book so that you can see what it covers.

- **Conclusion**
  - The final chapter should provide a summary of the main points in the book.

- **Relevant chapters**
  - Before you read any chapters in detail, skim through them.
Reading relevant chapters

- Look for chapter summaries
- Look at headings
- Look at first lines of paragraphs
- Identify sections that require detailed reading – note these down, or mark them with post-its

**Ebooks**

Different ebook platforms have different features, but the following may be useful:

- **Description**
  - The description of the book to see what it covers.

- **Search**
  - You can usually search for specific text in the ebook.

- **Table of contents**
  - Check the table of contents to see if there is a chapter on your topic. Each chapter title is usually a link so that you can get to it directly.

- **Index?**
  - You should be able to view the book's index, but this might not be so useful if it doesn't contain links. You may need to enter page numbers to access the relevant section.

- **Relevant chapters**
  - Before you read any chapters in detail, skim through them. Can you highlight text online or make notes?
Journal articles
Journal articles provide high-quality, up-to-date accounts of research. Look in particular for peer-reviewed journals where articles are evaluated anonymously by experts in that subject area before they are approved for publication.

How to read a journal article
You may find it helpful to look at a journal article in the following order:

- **Abstract**
  - The abstract is presented at the top of the article, and is a summary of the whole article. Start here, as it will help you to identify whether the article is useful to you.

- **Introduction**
  - Scan over the introduction for key ideas which provide a background to the study.

- **Conclusion**
  - The conclusion, near the end of the article, may have other names – for example, it may be called the discussion section. Reading this section will enable you to see the main findings from the paper. It’s good to understand these conclusions before reading the detail of the results and the methodology. This section will often include limitations too, which may be helpful.

- **Results**
  - The results section gives the detailed findings. Sometimes these can appear off-putting, so try to identify the main points. There are often tables of data as well as text. You might find it quicker to look at the tables of data for an overview.

- **Methods**
  - The methods section covers what kind of research was carried out and how. If you are a SoH&SC student who is required to appraise articles for evidence-based practice, you’ll need to look at this section in detail.
When you have skinned through the article, highlight sections that require detailed reading.

You should also consider the implications of the article for your search strategy. If the article is particularly useful, you can use it as a springboard for your ongoing literature search:

- **Author**
  - Written other similar papers?

- **Publication**
  - Browse other issues of this journal?

- **References**
  - Previous research worth reading?

- **Keywords**
  - Any new terms for your searches?

- **Citings?**
  - Worth searching for research which has quoted this paper?