

UNDERSTANDING THE LITERATURE

**How to understand what you are reading
How to focus on the relevant literature**

STEP 1

At first glance, you may be:

- Finding it hard to understand what you are reading
- Unsure of how to focus your reading on the most relevant literature
- Feeling like you are drowning in a sea of unfamiliar words and jargon

How to overcome these difficulties:

- Start by reading around the subject area and getting a general feel for it; for example, you may like to try a basic textbook before you move onto more complicated literature
- Talk to your tutor and fellow students
- Use a subject specific dictionary, and keep your own list of words which are new to you
- Use paper or electronic encyclopaedias
- Photocopy glossaries (lists of words with their meanings) from the back of textbooks, and keep them for reference

STEP 2

Once you understand the basics, you can move on to the more in-depth materials; for example, journal articles.

If you are finding it difficult to understand what you reading at this level:

- Do not let it put you off; difficulties are common when you move to reading at a higher level
- Break your reading up into small chunks; for example one paragraph or chapter at a time
- As you read, draw diagrams of ideas and arguments, and the relationships between them
- Consider how individual ideas and arguments fit into the bigger picture of the subject area

Focus your reading

As you start to read more deeply, it can be easy to lose your focus on the core subject area. Try:

- Prioritising literature you read in terms of its relevance to your core subject area - high, medium, or low
- Scanning through a book or article to decide if it is relevant, before you read it in more depth

STEP 3

Developing the skill of critical analysis

As your knowledge and understanding of the subject area develop, so will your ability to critically analyse what you are reading.

Critical thinking and analysis are covered in depth in the Critical thinking and analysis topic. [[link](#) to Critical thinking and analysis - student menu - content info sheet]