Making the most of summer reading

How to prepare for reading at university

Studying at university will require reading at an advanced level. When moving from school to university, students face new challenges with reading:

- Coping with the volume and choice of reading
- Concentrating for longer periods of time
- Making sense of difficult reading material.

As an offer holder, you may experience these common challenges with your summer reading. This gives you a great opportunity to advance your reading skills in preparation for university.

This guide

This guide answers the main challenges which students face when starting reading at university. New students often worry about the following questions:

- What should I read?
- How can I stay focused and motivated?
- What should I do when I don’t understand?
What should I read?

Volume and choice

At university, each reading list might have several large textbooks, or a large number of books and articles. The volume of reading can make you want to rush in as quickly as possible and read everything from start to finish. However, you will not have time to read everything cover to cover during term time at university. Instead, you need to decide why you are reading. Clear priorities and goals will help you to decide what material, and how much of it, you will read.

Reading material for offer holders

You will probably get a summer reading list sent to all offer holders. First, browse the reading list. If you don’t have a reading list, here are examples of summer reading that are free to read online.

Links: S. Silklos, Advanced Problems in Mathematics
https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/1050
J. Blair, The Anglo-Saxon Age
https://archive.org/details/anglosaxonagever00blai (set up an account first)

Activities for selecting reading material

What’s my priority?

Look at the summer reading and choose material that seems a priority for you. It might tackle an interest of yours, or a topic you want to learn about before starting university. The material might be a textbook with problems, a work of literature, or an article or book by a scholar.

What’s my goal?

Look at your chosen material and decide why you are reading it. What do you want to learn? Do you have questions you want answered? How will you know when you have achieved your goal and can move on to read something else?

Which sections are most relevant?

Before reading, examine the material. Are some sections more relevant to your goal? Look at any chapter titles or headings, a table of contents or index, diagrams or pictures, the introduction and conclusion. You may decide to focus on one chapter, or read one section more carefully than others.
How do I stay focused and motivated?

Independent study

Reading is one of the key ways students learn at university. You will spend much more time using textbooks, lecture notes, articles, and books than you did at school. At home during summer, it can feel hard to settle down to read without the external motivation of exams, teachers, or deadlines, especially if your home is quite busy or noisy. However, university students have to be self-motivated too. Summer is a good chance to develop your ability to go into work mode and stay focused.

Activities to improve your concentration

You might want to try these activities to build better concentration:

- **Read in half-hour blocks.** Don’t decide “I’ll read for three hours” if you know this is unlikely! Many students read for 25 minutes, then take a 5-minute break away from their desk.

- **Remove distractions.** Don’t check your phone or email while reading, or have several browser windows open. If your home is noisy, reduce the distractions with ear plugs or a white noise app.

- **Interact with the text.** Don’t allow your mind to wander. Highlight, underline, take notes, or make a mind map while you read.

Building concentration might take time. After reading, notice the problems you faced and decide an action to prevent this happening next time.

Apps and websites to aid concentration

Timers

You can set a timer on your phone. Or this online timer will help you to work in 25 minute bursts, with breaks: [https://tomato-timer.com](https://tomato-timer.com).

Web and phone blockers

You can block your use of social media and other websites while you are studying. Check out Freedom web blocker ([https://freedom.to](https://freedom.to)) and phone blockers like the Flora or Fauna apps.

Noise

Earplugs can be bought at about £3 a pair, or you can use earphones and music. There are also free white noise sites to help block out environmental noise. Check out [http://mynoise.net](http://mynoise.net).
What should I do if I don’t understand?

Reading as learning

Reading at university is a part of independent learning. You figure out as much as possible by yourself, before discussing the topic with your tutors. You might read about something you didn’t understand in a lecture, or because you have an essay on a topic which is completely new to you. This can be hard at first, as you learn how to learn in a new more independent way.

If some of the summer reading material is difficult, don’t skip or avoid it, but try different ways to make sense of it. Be an active reader. Instead of sitting back and passively “listening” to the text or allowing the ideas to wash over you and hoping they stick, you need to explain the material to yourself as you read.

Questions for active reading

When doing the summer reading, practice asking yourself questions:

- What is the main idea in this bit?
- Could I explain this idea clearly to another student?
- How does the idea link to other ideas in this reading, or other readings on my summer list?
- How does the idea link to what I already know on this topic?
- Does this idea answer any questions I’ve had about this topic?
- Does this idea contradict or change what I knew before?

Asking yourself questions improves your understanding of what you read.

Find out more

Benjamin is a student with dyslexia who studied at the University of Oxford. Listen to Benjamin as he explains how he developed more selective reading habits: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbztCPl1160.

For advice on active reading for mathematics, there is a special guide by Loughborough University. You can access it here: https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/media/schoolanddepartments/mathematics-education-centre/downloads/research/SE-booklet.pdf

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