



Tips for Summer Reading



Hertford College

Academic Skills

About this guide

Many students feel uncertain of the best way to tackle their summer reading. Common uncertainties in new students are:

How much should I do?

What if I can't focus?

What if I just don't understand?

These uncertainties all stem from the same cause: learning at university is very different from learning at school. At school, learning was managed by your teachers. At university, it is common to be given reading lists, essays or problems to work at on your own. You can often choose what and how to learn, you get to create your own routine, and figure things out independently.

Your summer reading is a chance to start learning how to learn at university. Here are some tips on getting started.



How much should I do?

At school, the content was always broken down into manageable chunks. Now, your tutor may send a list of books to read, or suggest several large textbooks to help you complete problem sheets. You might feel overwhelmed and worry: do I have to read everything? The answer is no!

Be practical: what can you access? how much can you cover? what's the best preparation for you?

If your tutor sends a problem sheet, it may move beyond what you studied at school, or point to areas which you have studied but remain underconfident. Your tutor may recommend large textbooks. You're not expected to read cover to cover! Instead, you should break it down into manageable chunks yourself. Use the index or contents page to locate the sections which will help you complete the problems, or address gaps in your knowledge.

Tip: Locate the sections which help you complete any pre-course tasks.

Some tutors send a list of set texts that you will study in term. In this case, it is a good idea to read at least some of them now. In some subjects, they have archaic languages or were written in contexts very different from our own, which can make reading slow and challenging. Familiarising yourself with them now can remove the pressure of trying to do this during a busy term.

Tip: Familiarising yourself with set texts will take the pressure off during term.

If your tutor sends a reading list with a number of possible titles to read, remember you're not expected to read everything. Decide what your goal is for your summer reading. Do you want to prioritise books on a new topic you hope to study? Do you want to follow a particular interest? Do you want to get a head start by reading something you know you will use during term?

Tip: Prioritise books which seem most relevant for your learning goals.

If you have a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) that affects how you process information, large textbooks or long reading lists can seem even more daunting. Focus on a smaller number of texts that seem particularly helpful or interesting. This will give you more time with each text. If you can't decide, contact your tutor for guidance.

Tip: For students with SpLDs, less is more: decide the greatest priority.



What if I can't focus?

At school, it was relatively easy to focus and complete the work within a structure of classes, homework, and teacher oversight. You might find it hard to settle down to work during summer, with no one looking over your shoulder. However, as adults at university, focusing is your responsibility, and summer reading is a good opportunity to see what works for you.

Tips: Most students focus best when they break the work down:

- **into a single task.** Decide what you are going to do. Clear your workspace of other books or materials, close other windows on your laptop or tablet, and put your phone on silent and out of sight.
- **into short periods.** Work for 25 minutes, then take a 5-minute break to stretch, walk, or get a drink. Repeat this 25+5 block several times, then take a long break or finish for the day. Long study periods without breaks can lead us to lose focus.
- **into short steps.** A big task can be overwhelming and demotivating, e.g. *I want to do this problem sheet today.* Write a list of steps and check them off, e.g. *First I'll read the problems and jot down what I know (25 minutes), Then I'll do a few of the easier problems (25 minutes).*

If you have an SpLD, working in **little and regular** chunks is key.



What if I don't understand?

At school, reading was not as crucial as at university because material was often explained verbally until most of the room understood. At university, learning relies much more on your own reading.

The reading material you face at university is rarely something you understand immediately first time. It is normal to only partially understand something, and then use varied strategies to build towards a greater understanding. Summer reading is a good chance to develop these skills.

Be an active reader: read several paragraphs, and then see can you explain it in your own words. This is a good way to check your own comprehension, and also plant the information in your mind.

Tip: Pause to explain the contents in your own words.

Make note of what you don't understand. Instead of stopping and starting constantly, it can be helpful to write the questions on some paper to research later. When you finish the section you set out to read, you can switch to research. Highlight the most burning questions, and spend some time looking them up.

Tip: Write down questions to research later.

There will be some areas which you haven't studied and other students have. This happens to everyone. In this case, you might find the reading suggestions assume a lot of knowledge you don't have. The best approach may be finding a more introductory text to read as a stepping stone.

Tip: Where needed, find a more introductory text.

Some SpLDs can make it more challenging the first time you face new information. Give yourself time to read, reread, and then revisit again a few days later.



Further Reading:

- General reading: Jamie Roberts, *Reading at University: How to Improve Your Focus and Be More Critical* (Macmillan, 2020).
- Reading in mathematics:
<https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/media/schoolanddepartments/mathematics-education-centre/downloads/research/SE-booklet.pdf>.
- Reading and dyslexia at Oxford:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbztCPI1160>.
- Studying with ADD or ADHD by the University of Leiden:
<file:///C:/Users/SloanC/OneDrive%20-%20Nexus365/DAS/studying-with-add-or-adhd---eng-def.pdf>.