**Mohamed Boudhiaf University of M’Sila Faculty of Letters and Languages**

**Department of English Language and Literature Module: Research Methodology…. 1st Year**

**Lecture n°6 in RM**

**How to promote effective research and reading** **strategies**

##### Make a Meal of your Reading – Use the QOOQRRR

It is clear that you are already aware that you will be required to read – and that you are also aware that academic reading might prove challenging to you. Indeed academic research involves much more than working through your reading list, plodding through each text from cover to painful cover, and academic reading involves much more than copying out huge chunks of text to quote in your essays. It is definitely much more than finding an article online and cutting and pasting it directly into your assignments – this is considered plagiarism, which is a serious academic offence and we have ways of discovering if you have done that!

Academic reading is about carefully selecting what to read, knowing why you are reading it, and then reading in an interactive and interrogatory manner. We are going to look at an active reading system called QOOQRRR – which stands for question, overview, overview, question, read, re-read and review – and we are going to look at each of these processes in turn.

###### **Question – why am I reading, or reading with a purpose**

There is no one reason to read academically – there are many:

We can read because we are a novice in a subject, we are just starting to study a topic and learn about it and we need an overview to aid our understanding.

We may be reading because we have a basic understanding of a subject, we feel initiated into it, and now we want to explore the more controversial arguments or knowledge-claims – we are no longer happy sticking to the basic texts.

We may be reading because the lecturer has mentioned someone who sounds interesting and we want to see what that person has to say.

On the other hand, we may have read from the reading list and followed up the people that the lecturer has mentioned in class and now we want to find someone who no one else has mentioned at all.

We may be reading extensively to find a whole series of quotes or references for a whole essay or reading to find one quote to finish off an already good paragraph.

These are all valid reasons for reading but they will all require a slightly different reading approach and should be accompanied by different note-making techniques. It is ridiculous to make detailed notes on a whole chapter if we are only looking for one quote, for example. But similarly just jotting down a couple of quotes will be no use if we have no understanding of the subject at all – and we are really reading to initiate our understanding of a completely new topic. Knowing why you are reading will help you become an active and successful academic reader.

###### **Overview – Reading with a Context**

Academic research is difficult. Shout this at students. It usually involves a very intense form of reading wherein we are searching for information to aid our understanding of what we are studying: we read within a CONTEXT and we must understand that context to target our research and make sense of our reading.

###### **Overview – Choosing what to Read and Knowing what you are Reading**

Once you know why you are reading – that is you have an understanding of your own broad goals (to gather an overview/general understanding, argument, contrary argument, quotes, references, etc.) matched against the course context (aims, outcomes and assignment) – you should be in a position to start the process of deciding what to read. Here you move through another series of overviewing processes:

Overview all that the library – or the Internet – has to offer on (one of the key words of) your topic;

Overview a book or journal;

Overview a chapter or article; overview each paragraph.

**That is, typically you will want to overview the following sources of information in order to select what to read:**

Library catalogue – which can lead you to key texts or journals.

*First decision time* – Make decisions about how many books and journals you are going to dip into for your assignment. Pace this reading over several weeks.

With a book – scan the index to search for assignment ‘words’ on particular pages – and the contents pages to see if there are whole chapters on your topic.

With a chapter (or a journal article) – read the introduction (first paragraph) and the conclusion (last paragraph) first. These summarise the whole chapter. Think, what is this about? Do I need to read it? Why will I read it?

Paragraphs – read the first line of every paragraph. These topic sentences or paragraph introductions tell you what the paragraph is about. Think about that too.

Once you have read the intro, the conclusion and the topic sentences you should have a very clear outline of a whole chapter (or journal article). This leads to your –

*Second decision time* – you must choose exactly **what** you are going to read: you need to decide which bits to read in-depth and which bits to scan.

###### **Question – and question again**

So we have looked at Q for question in terms reading with a purpose and O for overview in terms of reading with a context and of choosing and understanding what we are reading. It is time to question and question again.

***Why am I reading* this*, now?***

Make clear to yourself exactly why you are reading what you have decided to read. Here a targeted brainstorm will help. Ask yourself:

What key word am I reading around?

What do I already know on this topic?

What do I need to find out?

Which bit of my assignment will it help me with?

Which learning outcome does it meet?

Where will I use this information?

This brainstorm really tunes your brain into the reading that you are about to do. When you read in this manner you get more from your reading than if you just passively start reading something not quite knowing what, why or how it will help you.

The second questioning is to read actively, asking more questions as you go, which we will cover next.

###### **Read**

While this academic reading is the reading that does seem to intimidate many students, it is something that does get easier with practice. Typically this reading is more successful if undertaken in manageable chunks – usually a paragraph at a time – and if reading is active and interactive. Active in that you should read asking a series of questions as you go. Interactive in that you really do need to get physical with texts when reading – you need to underline, highlight, make margin notes and comments (but only if they are your texts). If working with library resources you should photocopy them first and get physical with the photocopy – you should never mark up or annotate someone else’s book!

***Manageable chunks***

Put paper markers or paper clips in your book to mark off the section that you intend to read. This helps the brain to relax – I can manage that much! Otherwise you can look at a huge textbook and think ‘I can never manage all that!’

Take it a paragraph at a time. Each academic paragraph is often like a mini-essay with a proposition, an argument, evidence, discussion and final point. Thus each paragraph deserves detailed consideration before you move on to the next. Read one paragraph at a time, asking the following questions as you go.

***Reading questions***

What is the main idea? The main topic of the paragraph is usually revealed in the introductory sentence. Read that. Underline/highlight the key word – or summarise the topic for yourself and write your key word in the margin.

What is the author’s argument? Decide what the author is saying about the topic. Are they for it or against it? Make a margin note.

Where is the author coming from? Here you should be looking for the author’s position on the topic – are they on the left or the right? Are they a Marxist or a postmodernist? Is this distinction important in your subject? (This is typically more important in the arts and social sciences – and even in business, computing, leisure and tourism – than in some areas of science or engineering, but it never hurts to notice.) Again, make a note.

Have I encountered similar arguments before? Where? Relate your reading to what you have heard in lectures and seminars – and to what you have encountered in other texts. Write the names of people who agree with this in the margin.

Have I encountered different arguments from this? Again this means relating this reading to other ideas that you have encountered and actively noticing that people disagree with each other, that different arguments will be offered on the same topic. You have to note the people who think one way and the ones that think differently. Write the names of people who might disagree with this author – perhaps in different coloured ink from the names of people who might support the view that you are reading.

What evidence is being offered? Obviously we are looking for argument rather than assertion so evidence should be offered to back up the argument being made – look for it and highlight it.

Is the evidence valid? Why do I think it is or is not valid? This is definitely something that gets easier with practice. Remember, things are not true just because they are in print. You will need to get used to looking for and then judging the evidence that is being offered.

Do I agree or disagree with what I am reading? And why? Again, this is another thing that gets easier with practice. Often when we just start studying a subject we may not feel qualified to judge what we are reading . . . but it is the nature of the British education system that we read interrogatively, and that we get used to judging argument, evidence and knowledge-claims for ourselves.

What is the author’s final point? Often an academic paragraph has an actual or an implied ‘therefore’ or ‘this means that . . .’ – often near the end or actually in the very last sentence. Look for these points.

**Tip:** When doing this first read through, only make notes on the text itself – do not make your ‘take away’ notes yet. Notes made too soon tend to be too long and detailed – much too passive. Think and annotate now – make notes later.

Once you have read one manageable chunk or paragraph in the way we have suggested using all your resources, move on to read the next and the next – annotating as you go.

Note that this active, interactive reading system may appear slow and cumbersome at first but:

1. It will get easier with practice.
2. It also gets easier when you are adding to information (becoming an initiate) as opposed to just starting out (being a novice), where everything is new – and noteworthy.
3. Actively selecting what to read allows us to read less in quantity but more in quality. That is, when reading, you should know which bits to scan and skip and which bits to read in depth. And, when reading in this way, you are understanding as you go rather than hoping that understanding will follow at a later date.

###### **Re-read**

As said, it is not advisable to make notes on your first read through something. It is always tempting to do so – we always think that we can save time if we just start making notes immediately – but it is usually a costly thing to do. Typically notes that are made too soon are too passive and too long. Work through your text thinking and annotating, then re-read your own annotations and marginalia, note what you have underlined or highlighted ... then go back to your original reading goals. What were you reading for and why? Ask yourself whether or not your annotations, marginalia and highlighting captured all that you wanted from the text. Do you understand it all? If the answer to these questions is yes then you are ready to use your annotations to create your own set of notes on that text. If the answer to the first question was no you are missing bits of information – go through and mark up some more. If you do not understand what you have read discuss it with your study partner, your tutor (if possible) or with the learning development people. We do learn more when we understand what we are trying to learn.

***Review***

The final part of this active and interactive academic reading system is the review. This is where you, the student, have to look over the notes that you have made, judging for yourself whether or not they are useful, useable and effective. It is vital that you begin the habit of checking the quality of your own work as soon as possible. Do not rely on other people, even tutors, to tell you whether or not you are doing a good job. Start deciding for yourself.

When you are happy with your notes move on to additional reading – or to drafting your writing!

###### **Conclusion**

We have looked at the QOOQRRR system – in particular we have focused on how active a reader you have to be in terms of reading with a purpose and a context – which involves questioning why you are reading and of having an overview of the course for which you are reading. It also involves scanning all the sources of information at your disposal. We recommended an active and interactive reading strategy that requires you to ask questions of your reading as you go, and to mark up and annotate your texts – stressing that they must be *your* texts! We recommend that the only notes that you make on a first read through are those annotations on the text itself and that afterwards you re-read these in order to structure your own notes. Finally we stressed that you have to take control of your own work – and that includes judging whether or not your notes are useful, useable and effective. One thing that we emphasised here is that notes be adequately and accurately sourced. We made recommendations as to key word notes, paragraph patterns and building up an index card collection from the very beginning of your time as a student.