1.1: Post-Secondary Reading and Writing (Part 1)

Skills to Develop

- Understand the expectations for reading and writing assignments in post-secondary (university, college, institute) courses
- Understand and apply general strategies to complete post-secondary-level reading assignments efficiently and effectively
- Recognize specific types of writing assignments frequently included in post-secondary courses
- Understand and apply general strategies for managing post-secondary-level writing assignments
- Determine specific reading and writing strategies that work best for you individually

In a post-secondary environment, academic expectations change from what you may have experienced in high school. The quantity of work you are expected to do is increased. When instructors expect you to read pages upon pages or study hours and hours for one particular course, managing your workload can be challenging. This chapter includes strategies for studying efficiently and managing your time.

The quality of the work you do also changes. It is not enough to understand course material and summarize it on an exam. You will also be expected to seriously engage with new ideas by reflecting on them, analyzing them, critiquing them, making connections, drawing conclusions, or finding new ways of thinking about a given subject. Educationally, you are moving into deeper waters. A good introductory writing course will help you swim.

Table 1.1: High School versus Post-Secondary Assignments summarizes some of the other major differences between high school and university assignments.
Table 1.1 - High School versus Post-Secondary Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Post-Secondary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading assignments are moderately long. Teachers may set aside some class time for reading and reviewing the material in depth.</td>
<td>Some reading assignments may be very long. You will be expected to come to class with a basic understanding of the material.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers often provide study guides and other aids to help you prepare for exams.</td>
<td>Reviewing for exams is primarily your responsibility.</td>
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<td>Your grade is determined by your performance on a wide variety of assessments, including minor and major assignments. Not all assessments are writing based.</td>
<td>Your grade may depend on just a few major assessments. Most assessments are writing based.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing assignments include personal writing and creative writing in addition to expository writing.</td>
<td>Outside of creative writing courses, most writing assignments are expository.</td>
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<td>The structure and format of writing assignments is generally stable over the high school years.</td>
<td>Depending on the course, you may be asked to master new forms of writing and follow standards within a particular professional field.</td>
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<td>Teachers often go out of their way to identify and try to help students who are performing poorly on exams, missing classes, not turning in assignments, or just struggling with the course. Often teachers will give students many “second chances.”</td>
<td>Although teachers want their students to succeed, they may not always realize when students are struggling. They also expect you to be proactive and take steps to help yourself. “Second chances” are less common.</td>
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This chapter covers the types of reading and writing assignments you will encounter as a post-secondary student. You will also learn a variety of strategies for mastering these new challenges—and becoming a more confident student and writer.

Throughout this chapter, you will follow a first-year student named Crystal. After several years of working as a saleswoman in a department store, Crystal has decided to pursue a degree in elementary education and become a teacher. She is continuing to work part time, and occasionally she finds it challenging to balance the demands of work, school, and caring for her four-year-old son. As you read about Crystal, think about how you can use her experience to get the most out of your own experience.

Setting Goals

By planning carefully and following through on her daily and weekly goals, Crystal was able to fulfill one of her goals for the semester. Although her exam scores were not as high as she had hoped, her consistently strong performance on writing assignments tipped her grade from a B+ to an A−. She was pleased to have earned a high grade in one of the required courses for her major. She was also glad to have gotten the most out of an introductory course that would help her become an effective teacher.

How does Crystal’s experience relate to your own post-secondary educational experience?

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Composition/Book%3A_Writing_for_Success_(1st_Canadian_Edition)/1%3A_Introd…

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To do well in the post-secondary environment, it is important to stay focused on how your day-to-day actions determine your long-term success. You may not have defined your career goals or chosen a major yet. Even so, you surely have some overarching goals for what you want out of your studies to expand your career options, to increase your earning power, or just to learn something new. In time, you will define your long-term goals more explicitly. Doing solid, steady work, day by day and week by week, will help you meet those goals.

With your group, discuss the following issues and questions:

Introduce yourself: Who are you? Why are you taking the course? Where are you living now?

• How do you feel about writing in general? (You will not be judged on this.)
• Identify one long-term goal you would like to have achieved by the time you complete your diploma or degree. For instance, you might want a particular job in your field.
• Identify one semester goal that will help you fulfill the long-term goal you just set.
• Review Table 1.1, High School versus Post-Secondary Assignments and answer the following questions:
  • In what ways do you think post-secondary education will be rewarding for you as a learner?
  • What aspects of post-secondary education do you expect to find most challenging?
  • What changes do you think you might have to make in your life to ensure your success in a post-secondary learning environment?

Reading Strategies

Your post-secondary courses will sharpen both your reading and your writing skills. Most of your writing assignments—from brief response papers to in-depth research projects—will depend on your understanding of course reading assignments or related readings you do on your own. And it is difficult, if not impossible, to write effectively about a text that you have not understood. Even when you do understand the reading, it can be hard to write about it if you do not feel personally engaged with the ideas discussed.

This section discusses strategies you can use to get the most out of your reading assignments. These strategies fall into three broad categories:

• Planning strategies to help you manage your reading assignments
• Comprehension strategies to help you understand the material
• Active reading strategies to take your understanding to a higher and deeper level

Planning Your Reading

Have you ever stayed up all night cramming just before an exam? Or found yourself skimming a detailed memo from your boss five minutes before a crucial meeting? The first step in handling your reading successfully is planning. This involves both managing your time and setting a clear purpose for your reading.
Managing Your Reading Time

You will learn more detailed strategies for time management in Section 1.2: Developing Study Skills, but for now, focus on setting aside enough time for reading and breaking your assignments into manageable chunks. For example, if you are assigned a 70-page chapter to read for next week’s class, try not to wait until the night before to get started. Give yourself at least a few days and tackle one section at a time.

Your method for breaking up the assignment will depend on the type of reading. If the text is very dense and packed with unfamiliar terms and concepts, you may need to read no more than 5 or 10 pages in one sitting so that you can truly understand and process the information. With more user-friendly texts, you will be able to handle longer sections—20 to 40 pages, for instance. And if you have a highly engaging reading assignment, such as a novel you cannot put down, you may be able to read lengthy passages in one sitting.

As the semester progresses, you will develop a better sense of how much time you need to allow for the reading assignments in different subjects. It also makes sense to preview each assignment well in advance to assess its difficulty level and to determine how much reading time to set aside.

Tip

Instructors at the post-secondary level often set aside reserve readings for a particular course. These consist of articles, book chapters, or other texts that are not part of the primary course textbook. Copies of reserve readings are available through the university library, in print, or more often, online. When you are assigned a reserve reading, download it ahead of time (and let your instructor know if you have trouble accessing it). Skim through it to get a rough idea of how much time you will need to read the assignment in full.

Setting a Purpose

The other key component of planning is setting a purpose. Knowing what you want to get out of a reading assignment helps you determine how to approach it and how much time to spend on it. It also helps you stay focused during those occasional moments when it is late, you are tired, and when relaxing in front of the television sounds far more appealing than curling up with a stack of journal articles.

Sometimes your purpose is simple. You might just need to understand the reading material well enough to discuss it intelligently in class the next day. However, your purpose will often go beyond that. For instance, you might also read to compare two texts, to formulate a personal response to a text, or to gather ideas for future research. Here are some questions to ask to help determine your purpose:

How did my instructor frame the assignment? Often instructors will tell you what they expect you to get out of the reading. For example:

Read Chapter 2 and come to class prepared to discuss current theories related to conducting risk assessments.

Read these two articles and compare Smith’s and Jones’s perspectives on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982).

Read Chapter 5 and think about how you could apply these guidelines to the first stages of onsite patient assessment.
How deeply do I need to understand the reading? If you are majoring in emergency management and you are assigned to read Chapter 1, “Introduction to Emergency Management,” it is safe to assume the chapter presents fundamental concepts that you will be expected to master. However, for some reading assignments, you may be expected to form a general understanding but not necessarily master the content. Again, pay attention to how your instructor presents the assignment.

How does this assignment relate to other course readings or to concepts discussed in class? Your instructor may make some of these connections explicitly, but if not, try to draw connections on your own. (Needless to say, it helps to take detailed notes both when in class and when you read.)

How might I use this text again in the future? If you are assigned to read about a topic that has always interested you, your reading assignment might help you develop ideas for a future research paper. Some reading assignments provide valuable tips or summaries worth bookmarking for future reference. Think about what you can take from the reading that will stay with you.

**Improving Your Comprehension**

You have blocked out time for your reading assignments and set a purpose for reading. Now comes the challenge: making sure you actually understand all the information you are expected to process. Some of your reading assignments will be fairly straightforward. Others, however, will be longer or more complex, so you will need a plan for how to handle them.

For any expository writing—that is, nonfiction, informational writing—your first comprehension goal is to identify the main points and relate any details to those main points. Because post-secondary-level texts can be challenging, you will also need to monitor your reading comprehension. That is, you will need to stop periodically and assess how well you understand what you are reading. Finally, you can improve comprehension by taking time to determine which strategies work best for you and putting those strategies into practice.

**Identifying the Main Points**

In your courses, you will be reading a wide variety of materials, including the following:

- Textbooks. These usually include summaries, glossaries, comprehension questions, and other study aids.
- Nonfiction trade books. These are less likely to include the study features found in textbooks.
- Popular magazines, newspapers, or web articles. These are usually written for a general audience.
- Scholarly books and journal articles. These are written for an audience of specialists in a given field.

Regardless of what type of expository text you are assigned to read, your primary comprehension goal is to identify the main point: the most important idea that the writer wants to communicate and often states early on. Finding the main point gives you a framework to organize the details presented in the reading and relate the reading to concepts you have learned in class or through other reading assignments. After identifying the main point, you will find the supporting points, details, facts, and explanations that develop and clarify the main point.

Some texts make that task relatively easy. Textbooks, for instance, include the aforementioned features as well as
headings and subheadings intended to make it easier for students to identify core concepts. Graphic features such as sidebars, diagrams, and charts help students understand complex information and distinguish between essential and inessential points. When you are assigned to read from a textbook, be sure to use available comprehension aids to help you identify the main points.

Trade books and popular articles may not be written specifically for an educational purpose; nevertheless, they also include features that can help you identify the main ideas.

**Definition**

Trade books. Many trade books include an introduction that presents the writer’s main ideas and purpose for writing. Reading chapter titles (and any subtitles within the chapter) will help you get a broad sense of what is covered. It also helps to read the beginning and ending paragraphs of a chapter closely. These paragraphs often sum up the main ideas presented.

Popular articles. Reading the headings and introductory paragraphs carefully is crucial. In magazine articles, these features (along with the closing paragraphs) present the main concepts. Hard news articles in newspapers present the gist of the news story in the lead paragraph, while subsequent paragraphs present increasingly general details.

At the far end of the reading difficulty scale are scholarly books and journal articles. Because these texts are aimed at a specialized, highly educated audience, the authors presume their readers are already familiar with the topic. The language and writing style is sophisticated and sometimes dense.

When you read scholarly books and journal articles, try to apply the same strategies discussed earlier for other types of text. The introduction usually presents the writer’s thesis—the idea or hypothesis the writer is trying to prove. Headings and subheadings can help you understand how the writer has organized support for the thesis. Additionally, academic journal articles often include a summary at the beginning, called an abstract, and electronic databases include summaries of articles too.

**Monitoring Your Comprehension**

Finding the main idea and paying attention to text features as you read helps you figure out what you should know. Just as important, however, is being able to figure out what you do not know and developing a strategy to deal with it.

Textbooks often include comprehension questions in the margins or at the end of a section or chapter. As you read, stop occasionally to answer these questions on paper or in your head. Use them to identify sections you may need to reread, read more carefully, or ask your instructor about later.

Even when a text does not have built-in comprehension features, you can actively monitor your own comprehension. Try these strategies, adapting them as needed to suit different kinds of texts:

- **Summarize.** At the end of each section, pause to summarize the main points in a few sentences. If you have trouble doing so, revisit that section. (You will learn more about this in Chapter 3.)

- **Ask and answer questions.** When you begin reading a section, try to identify two to three questions you should be able to answer.
to answer after you finish it. Write down your questions and use them to test yourself on the reading. If you cannot
answer a question, try to determine why. Is the answer buried in that section of reading but just not coming across to
you? Or do you expect to find the answer in another part of the reading?

Do not read in a vacuum. Look for opportunities to discuss the reading with your classmates. Many instructors set up
online discussion forums or blogs specifically for that purpose. Participating in these discussions can help you determine
whether your understanding of the main points is the same as your peers’.

These discussions can also serve as a reality check. If everyone in the class struggled with the reading, it may be
exceptionally challenging. If it was easy for everyone but you, you may need to see your instructor for help.

As a working mother, Crystal found that the best time to get her reading done was in the evening, after she had put her
four-year-old to bed. However, she occasionally had trouble concentrating at the end of a long day. She found that by
actively working to summarize the reading and asking and answering questions, she focused better and retained more
of what she read. She also found that evenings were a good time to check the class discussion forums that a few of her
instructors had created.

Exercise 1.1

Choose any text that that you have been assigned to read for one of your courses. In your notes, complete the following
tasks:

1. Summarize the main points of the text in two to three sentences.
2. Write down two to three questions about the text that you can bring up during class discussion.

Tip

Students are often reluctant to seek help. They feel like doing so marks them as slow, weak, or demanding. The truth is,
every learner occasionally struggles. If you are sincerely trying to keep up with the course reading but feel like you are in
over your head, seek help. Speak up in class, schedule a meeting with your instructor, or visit your university learning
centre for assistance.

Deal with the problem as early in the semester as you can. Instructors respect students who are proactive about their
own learning. Most instructors will work hard to help students who make the effort to help themselves.

Taking It to the Next Level: Active Reading

Now that you have acquainted (or reacquainted) yourself with useful planning and comprehension strategies, your
reading assignments may feel more manageable. You know what you need to do to get your reading done and make
sure you grasp the main points. However, the most successful students in are not only competent readers but active,
engaged readers.

There are two common strategies for active reading:

• Applying the four reading stages
Both will help you look at a text in depth and help prepare you for when you have to study to use the information on an exam. You should try them both and decide which works better for you.

Four Reading Stages

Everyone reads and retains (or not) information in different ways. However, applying the following four stages of reading whenever you pick up material will not only help you understand what you are reading, but will also increase the chances of your actually remembering what you have read. While it may seem that this strategy of four reading stages takes a lot of time, it will become more natural for you as you continue applying it. Also, using these four stages will actually save you time because you will already have retained a lot, if not all, of the content, so when it is time to study for your exam, you will find that you already know the material.

Effective academic reading and study seeks not only to gain an understanding of the facts, opinions, and beliefs presented in a text, but also of the biases, assumptions, and perspectives underlying the discussion. The aim is to analyze, interpret, and evaluate the text, and then to draw logical inferences and conclusions.

The four reading strategies you will need to sharpen in order to get through your material are:

- Survey reading
- Close reading
- Inquiry reading
- Critical reading

These four strategies all stress “reading as thinking.” You will need to read actively to comprehend and remember what you are reading, for both your own and your instructor’s purposes. In order to do that, you need to think about the relevance of ideas to one another and about their usefulness to you personally, professionally, and academically.

Again, this differs from our usual daily reading activities, where interest often determines what we choose to read rather than utility. What happens when we are really not interested in what we are reading or seeing? Our eyes move down the page and our minds are elsewhere. We may read anywhere from one paragraph to several pages and suddenly realize we do not have the foggiest idea what we have just read. Clearly focusing our reading purpose on surveying, reading closely, being inquisitive, and reading critically, means we are reading for specific results: we read faster, know what we want, and read to get it.

Survey reading

Surveying quickly (2 to 10 minutes if it is a long chapter) allows you to see the overall picture or gist of what the text is sharing with you. Some of the benefits of surveying are listed below:

- It increases reading rate and attention because you have a road map: a mental picture of the beginning, middle, and end of this journey.
- It helps you create a mental map, allowing you to organize your travel by highlighting key topics and getting impressions of relevance, which in turn helps in the business or remembering.
• It aids in budgeting study time because you know the length and difficulty of the material. Usually you read study material to find out what is there in order to go back later and learn it. With surveying you accomplish the same in one-tenth the time.
• It improves concentration because you know what is ahead and how what you are reading fits into the total picture.

**Technique for survey reading**

For a text or chapter, look at introductions, summaries, chapter headings, bold print, and graphics to piece together the main theme and its development.

**Practical uses**

Magazines, journals, books, chapters, sections of dense material, anything that allows for an overview.