

The purpose of your sources is to help you answer your research question.

As such, sources can perform different functions for your writing assignment: they can represent the state of research, create a theoretical framework, support your arguments, provide material for analysis, highlight examples, and so on.

When we read and take notes, we aim to activate and add to our existing knowledge network while we actively look for, select, categorize, evaluate and record information. And while we do this, we should also keep track of our own ideas, questions and impressions of the source. No wonder that this is an intense and time-consuming part of research!

To help you make this part of the writing process more systematic and less daunting, we have compiled a few tips to guide you before, during, and after you read. We recommend to fully read it through before you start working on your sources.

## Before reading

### Choose a consistent style for taking notes.

The aim is to take and keep your notes in an organized way, so that you can easily find and also understand your notes at a later point in time. Consider whether you would like to:

- make and collect notes digitally or in a paper notebook? You can also consider using both in different circumstances, for different purposes, or to combine the advantages of each type.
- highlight or underline content with different colours, or add symbols in the margins (or a combination)? Don't forget to create a legend what the colours/symbols mean (e.g. question mark = look up definition, yellow highlighter = relevant for research question, etc.).

Be sure not to mark pages of library books; only photocopies or PDF-files!

### Choose a place and time for reading.

Extracting information from sources and deciding on their value for your writing project requires a lot of concentration. Therefore, it is important to find a time and working environment with as few distractions as possible.

There is no universal solution for this – try different things and find out what works best for you.

### Check the credibility of the source.

Make sure that the text you want to work with adheres to the expectations directed at a serious scientific source. The following hallmarks may vary in definition and emphasis of what is considered 'knowledge' in your discipline – and how it can be approached. For instance, the understanding of 'objectivity' will differ in the natural sciences compared to the humanities.

There are, however, basic guidelines of good practice and credibility that apply to all academic disciplines and should thus be critically examined:

- ☐ The text was published in a professional medium that performs a profound quality check before publication (e.g. in peer-reviewed journals, or through an editorial from an official publisher).
- ☐ The author/s of the text has/have relevant and accredited qualifications that enable them to express themselves professionally in this area.
- ☐ The target group of the text is the scientific community, i.e. other researchers and lecturers. Readers must not necessarily come from the same branch of study, but the text should not be primarily directed at laypeople or the general public (in a way that a boulevard newspaper would, for instance).
- ☐ The aim of the text is to contribute to our academic/scientific knowledge – not to spread personal, political or religious views.
- ☐ The text treats sources correctly and transparently. Arguments are presented professionally through consistent reference with credible sources.
- ☐ The text is guided by the rules and regulations of science: this includes a critical reflection of reliability, objectivity and validity, as well as demonstrating transparency in research design and honesty in the discussion of its results and limitations.

Depending on your branch of study and your research object, primary sources may not be able to fulfill all (or any) of the above criteria. Primary sources are indispensable for answering your research question (see next point) and as such represent an essential part of your writing project.

Regardless of primary or secondary status, you should check all your sources thoroughly. If you are unsure about a source, you might still be able to use it if you consult a professor/supervisor and reflect on this critically in your writing.

## Check the relevance of the source and clarify your expectations.

Get a general impression of what the text is about by reading the abstract (if available) and the table of contents. Then skim quickly through the headlines, the conclusion (and if there is no abstract, you can also check the introduction). Skimming means: do not read slowly and in detail just yet! First, you need to decide whether this source is worth your time.

*The #1 question you should ask yourself at this point is: How will this source help me to answer my research question?* Decide on a goal or a question that this source needs to fulfill or answer in order to become eligible for your writing assignment. Write down what you expect from this source, e.g. "This article should demonstrate the usage of X using the approach of A, so that I can contrast this with the approach of B.". You will then have a gatekeeper to keep out superfluous content, as well as a signpost to guide you whenever you feel disoriented or distracted.

## Note down the source reference.

If the previous points are completed, it is time to write down the source details in the same place that you intend to take notes. *You must make clear where (and where within this source) your notes come from.*

This will grant you safety when you re-visit and use your notes in your writing assignment later.

You can deal with details of how to cite your source in your paper at another point in time, but you should at least copy down correctly the name(s) of the author(s), the date of publication, the title of the publication, the chapter or section title (if applicable), the page numbers (if applicable) or, if the source is web-based, the URL and the date on which you accessed it.

Additionally, it may be a good idea to enter this information directly into a literature management programme (e.g. citavi), or into a document containing your preliminary bibliography.

## **While reading**

After you have performed a critical quality and relevance check and clarified your expectations, you can begin reading the text in detail. When you reach difficult passages that you do not understand straight away, don't feel unsettled or obliged to stick with them. The meaning will usually become clear once you have read through the text completely. Perhaps there is a cross-reference to another source or another section in the book (which was assumed that readers may already know or have read first)? It might also be a good idea to take a break at some point to get some distance and re-visit the text with a fresh disposition.

Writing can help you to make sense of what you read. Let's take a look at what we mean with 'taking notes':

1. Filtering and collecting information: Select the most important information from the text via the style of taking notes that you have decided on. Be sure not to mark pages of library books; only photocopies or PDF-files! Then, type up the most important passages – either by quoting the original directly, or by summarizing in your own words (usually, a combination of both will be expected in your final paper). While you do this, keep your goal/question for the source in mind that you have decided on earlier. Some things to watch out for when summarizing in your own words:
  - You are always responsible for making clear where you have your information from (even and especially when you do not cite directly)! Best do this right at the beginning: e.g. Author X argues that ... (followed by a source reference).
  - You may neither come too close to the original, nor should you change the meaning of the original. Using synonyms and switching the sentence structure is not a summary in your own words! When handling small units of text (e.g. one sentence or a part of a sentence), it is best to cite it directly to avoid the abovementioned pitfalls.
2. Documenting your thoughts: Write down everything that comes to your mind while reading. Do you have a new idea for your writing project? Can you see connections to other sources, concepts etc.? How can you link the content of this source to the knowledge you already have? etc.
3. Collecting and organizing: Mind Maps can come in handy for this (*see our handout "Cluster and Mind Map"*). Try out different things and use what works well for you.

Some ideas to pay attention to while reading and taking notes (consider if these fit your goal/question for the source):

- Are there text passages that strike you as particularly interesting or important? Why?
- Does the text contain confusing passages (e.g. ambiguous meaning, unclear references or words/concepts that you may not yet be familiar with)?
- What does the author or team of authors argue – and how? What is their contribution to the subject?
- Is there something you could critically argue against or agree with?
- Can you identify or are you reminded of any parallels to other sources, seminars, concepts etc.?

### After reading

Summarize your findings.

Put both the text and your notes away. Take five minutes to write a brief summary of the text in your own words (in whole sentences, not bullet points). What were the main ideas? What was the main thing you took with you from reading it? What was left unclear?

Evaluate the usefulness of the source.

*Did the source fulfill your expectations regarding your goal or question?*

If yes: to what extent? Write down what you have learned from the source. Don't be afraid of being critical – this is an important characteristic of academic analysis that also helps to develop the necessary scientific distance to examine and compare the source later in the writing process.

If the source has not (yet) fulfilled your expectation,

- a) consider looking for another source to fulfill your expectation instead, or whether you already have enough material to make your point. Sometimes it is more efficient to do this than to continue reading.
- b) try to pin down why. Was the text difficult to understand overall? Then you should consider reading it again while looking up definitions of key terms as well as intertextual and cross-references to other sources. By the way: It is normal that complicated texts have to be read more than once to fully understand them – this is not a sign of personal failure 😊 When you read the text again, you can check if the passages you marked as important still appear as relevant to your goal/question this time. Perhaps you can use a different colour for highlighting or underlining passages in your second round of reading to make these stand out better.

Evaluate the place and time of reading.

Was it easy for you to concentrate? Why (or why not)?

If not: which small or big changes could you make next time to you read to reduce distractions?

Identify achievements and to-dos.

Before you end your work session for the day or on the source as a whole, keep track of what you've finished and what's still left to do. This also includes loose threads you may want to pick up on, such as contacting your peers or professor about a question you have, checking the (online) library database for a different source, or updating your bibliography.

Take a break.

Recharging and taking care of yourself is important, too! 😊

Translation and compilation of this handout by Juliane Homann and Julian Maresch (studierendenWERK BERLIN).

Sources:

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