

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Academic Listening

Part 7 - Academic reading



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This is not an accurate word-for-word transcript of the programme.

ANNOUNCER:

It's time for **Academic Listening** - a series for students at English-speaking universities. This time Susan Fearn is focusing on academic reading, but to begin with, let's hear from two people, a student and a teacher, as they tell us how they understand the problems of reading for academic purposes.

CLIP: Student

The problem of reading is to get used to [it]. It takes time.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

The main problem with reading is the actual amount of reading that you're likely to have to do at University - you may be given a book list which has fifteen, twenty or even thirty books on it and you've got a very short time in which to read those books and so what you really have to learn to do is read effectively and you also have to learn to be selective in what you read.

Susan: The reading you have to do as a student is quite different from any reading you do for pleasure. And there are particular problems associated with it. The first of these relates to the sheer volume of material that confronts you when you walk into the library or when you receive your reading list. There are other more obvious problems such as having to learn a whole new specialist vocabulary.

Well, we'll start with some tips. If you come across unfamiliar words when you're reading an academic text, try not to reach immediately for your dictionary. Practise trying to guess the meaning of the word from the context or from what you already know about the subject. Another World Service class member has advice for those of you who find you have so much to read that you just don't know where to start.

CLIP: Student

[NB: very rough transcript] Select material to read. You can't read everything - it's impossible. You need to be selective and make choices, and then focus on the uncertain aspects within a rational scheme. Make choices on where to focus.

Susan: In trying to decide what to read, it's worth remembering that no one expects you to read **everything** on your reading list. You need to narrow down the choice. Ask your tutor or lecturer what they consider to be the most important books or articles to read, and whether they can recommend particular chapters to look at. Other students on your course may have found certain texts to be particularly useful, so ask them for advice.

Once you've chosen your reading material, however you make that selection, it's vital that you should be absolutely clear **why** you're reading.

CLIP: Simon Williams

When you know the purpose of doing the reading, e.g. to prepare for an essay, you might arm yourself with a list of questions.

Susan: Simon Williams teaches English in the Language Centre at University College London.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Having found books, look at the contents in the index – academic books normally have an index – and look for key words. Make a note of those. Read the blurb - the description on the dust cover of the book. If material looks promising, skim through the first chapter and the conclusion. Like lectures, the middle section will amplify, give examples, explain ideas. So the important parts at this stage are the beginning and the end of the book, or the chapter, or the section.

Susan: Based on what you know about the subject already and what you need to know for your assignment or project, Simon Williams suggests you prepare a list of questions. This activity will help you focus more effectively on the ideas contained within the text. Then, you can adjust the speed and depth of your reading to suit your purposes, as Christine Reeves explains. She teaches English at Bell Norwich, a language school in the East of England.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

What you have to understand as students is that when you read, you don't read everything at the same speed - you have to learn to adapt or adjust your speed according to the level of understanding that you need from the material that you're reading, and I think that is one of the things that are very useful on an EAP course - that we actually try to teach you.

Susan: Well, that's the theory. How does it work in practice?

CLIP: Student

Describes her reading techniques (transcript not available)

CLIP: Christine Reeves

One technique of reading which will help you to read large quantities of material is for example skimming. Skimming isn't really reading - skimming is quickly looking over some material or a text to decide, is this useful for me - is it necessary - do I need to read it? So you're not really reading it word for word, you're looking for some key words - you're picking out the key words to decide, do I need to read it all? And in this way if you decide that it's necessary then you can read it but if it's not necessary then this is one way of eliminating a lot of material - and it will save you a lot of time.

Susan: Often, a quick glance at the title and any subtitles, at the chapter headings and any information about the author's special academic interests will soon tell you whether the book is likely to be useful for your purposes. You might then narrow down your search even further as you look for specific information using another reading technique. Christine Reeves again.

CLIP: Christine Reeves

Another technique that is very useful in reading is scanning. OK what is scanning and how is it different to skimming? In skimming you're just ... what you're doing is deciding, is this particular text useful for me, do I need to read it? Scanning is different in that you have an idea of what you are looking for - you have a specific question in your mind and you are looking for the answer to that question. It could be a date, a name, it could be a sentence. But

the thing is, you know what you are looking for - you have an idea of what you're looking for in the text.

Susan: It's a technique that's familiar to our anthropology student.

CLIP: Student

Describes how she uses scanning when looking for dates (transcript not available)

Susan: Once you've carried out this quick survey of a text, and established its overall content and suitability for your requirements, and armed with the list of questions you need answered, it's time for a slower more careful reading. It would help you enormously if you were able to read faster. And Simon Williams believes this is a skill you can develop.

CLIP: Simon Williams

Readers don't read word by word, they tend to look at the language of the text in chunks. That means their eye fixes on a group of words at once. They recognise the meaning of a whole phrase at once – perhaps unconsciously. Every time the reader focuses on a group of words, eye stops for a moment – as if they fix on that group – it's a kind of “fixation”. But that takes time – so the fewer fixations the reader can manage, the better.

Susan: So, that's something to try after the programme. Find a book or a magazine and think about how you read. Simon Williams suggests you'll find that your eyes don't move from one word to the next at a regular pace, but that they tend to stop on groups of words and phrases, which you comprehend in one go. This momentary rest on a group of words is sometimes called a “fixation” – and according to Simon Williams, the secret of speed reading lies in reducing the

number of these fixations.

CLIP: Simon Williams

In order to reduce the number of fixations, it helps if you can train yourself to read down the centre of the page instead of moving the eye from left to right so much. That way there are fewer fixations and your understanding is quicker. But don't try this with academic books, at least not at first, you'll miss so much important information. What you can do is look at light material, like magazines, newspapers, journals, and practise pushing yourself faster with material like that.

Susan: Of course, that may be easier said than done. Whenever I try this myself, I find I use so much mental energy concentrating on the reading process that I fail to take in what it is I'm reading. But stick with it - and eventually, you'll find that you're able to vary your reading speed to suit the material you're reading and your aim.

ANNOUNCER:

And that brings us to the end of this programme, in which Susan Fearn focused on reading academic texts and some useful reading techniques.