



# STUDYING SUCCESSFULLY

## How do you read smartly?

### Reading strategies

The pile of books that you need to go through at university is imposing. One book is even thicker than the other. You begin in high spirits, open the first book and start reading. After some time, you think to yourself: "What did I just read actually and how much more do I still need to read?" In despair you look at the large number of pages that you still need to read. You have no idea how you're going to get through it all. And you also don't really know what is actually important or not. Sounds familiar?

#### A good start

This can also be done very differently. The way to improve this is especially related to how you start your reading session. Many students dive into the book and wrestle their way through it, without first getting a grip on the material. However, that grip is actually essential. You can compare this to a jigsaw puzzle, which you made as a child. Back then, you started with the edges and the corners of the puzzle first, before you placed the other puzzle pieces. You also need those same edges and corners for your study material. What are those edges and corners of your study material?

#### Objective

An important corner piece is your objective. Why are you reading this book? What is expected of you after studying the book? What do you already know? How should you read it? Study books for a course on which you will be examined need to be read differently than a book which you need to get information from for a thesis. In this instance, we will assume that you are reading a book that you need to know for an exam.

#### And now the practical part: how do you do it?

Once you have established your aim, you will first get a grip on the book by reading in a focused manner. This will enable you to grasp the remaining edges and corners of the puzzle. This does not cost much time, but does help you understand the book. Focused reading has three levels (book, chapter, paragraph), each with a number of steps. First, we will list the steps for a book, and afterwards those for an article, too.

It is difficult to quickly get a grip on your study book, and to know what is important and what is less important. You should do this before you really start reading.

#### Tacking the book

##### Level 1 focused reading: the whole book

1. Tittle subtitle, author(s)
2. Back cover of the book

*You can often find information here about the goal, the target group and the author.*

3. Contents

*What can you expect? Examine it roughly first. Is it divided, for example, into parts? Is there a general conclusion or summary, also for each part? Examine it more closely afterwards. Which different chapters are there?*

4. Preface

*This is commonly skipped. That is also possible if it only contains words of thanks. However, you can also find a reader's guide, structure and approach here.*

5. Conclusion

*This cannot be found in all books, but if this is included you should start with this. Start by reading every first sentence of every paragraph of the conclusion. Read it in its entirety afterwards. You will then know where the author is heading with the book and you are immediately able to grasp the central theme of the book.*

6. Summary

*If you read this first, you will know exactly what you can expect and what is important. You should also read the first sentence of each paragraph in this case, and then everything afterwards.*

### Student Services

Student Psychologists' Office - Student Careers Centre - Student Counsellors  
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## 7. Introduction

*This is where you can find the 'what' and 'why' of the book.*

Result of this step: you will get a grip on the book in a short space of time, you will know where the author is heading and what you can expect. You may not understand everything, but you will know what things to take into account. Within 15 to 30 minutes, you will have already made good progress in terms of understanding the book.

### Level 2: focused reading; chapter

*Skim through the chapter. Read paragraph titles, headings, titles, the conclusion, the summary and any questions.*

*Duration: 10 minutes*

### Level 3: focused reading; paragraph

*Read the first sentence of every paragraph and then read the entire paragraph in detail.*

It could be that the book does not have a conclusion or a summary. You should then try to get a grip on the book or chapter as much as possible by knowing what the structure is, skimming through it and reading the first sentence of every paragraph. Often, this will also give you enough information.

### **Tackling the article**

Articles often have a high density of information and cannot be read quickly. You can, however, speed up your reading tempo by applying the focusing techniques. The following steps are important for an article:

1. title and author
2. abstract (the brief summary)
3. section headings
4. titles of figures or illustrations and suchlike
5. conclusion
6. summary
7. the first sentence of every paragraph
8. read the entire article

If you apply this technique, you will be able to read the article quicker and understand it better, as a result of which the total time spent on each article will decrease.

### **When should you practice focused reading?**

Actually always, except with a novel. Try applying this technique to reading an article in Saturday's newspaper. You will see that you quickly get a grip on the article if you only read the title, the text in bold, headings, captions and the first sentence of each paragraph.

### **Keeping up**

Successful study is largely a matter of keeping up by reading the literature and developing a helicopter view. The latter means having a clear picture of all the material and a clear understanding of the interrelationships. This takes time, however, and it is not possible to achieve this shortly before an exam. If you are able to read the relevant literature (first focused, then in more detail) prior to your lecture, then you are really on the right track. You can also be more proactive during the lecture (by asking questions) and understand things better. Should you ever find yourself with too little time, you always have 15 minutes to read the material in a focused way before the lecture. As a result, the lecture material will still stick in your mind to some extent. You should, in that case, read the literature in greater detail after the lecture is over.

### **Other reading strategies**

If you are going to read literature for a thesis or paper, you can apply the same steps in terms of focused reading. In this case, however, you will not read everything afterwards, but just select the parts of the text which are relevant to your objective.

### **Most important points**

- Make use of a reading strategy
- Always begin with focused reading before 'diving into' the book.
- There are three levels to focused reading: book, chapter, paragraph.

### **Further reading**

- Jan Willem van den Brandhof (2007), *Gebruik je hersenen*. ('Use your brain', Dutch only)
- Mark Tichelaar (2009), *Haal meer uit je hersenen*. ('Get more out of your brain', in Dutch only)

### **Training courses/workshops**

*De stapel te lijf* (Tackling the pile)

### **Questions?**

Do you still have questions? Send an email to the student counsellor Ans Rekers: [a.m.rekers@uva.nl](mailto:a.m.rekers@uva.nl).

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