mmu Institute of Education

Continuing Professional Development
Professional Development Programme

Manchester
Metropolitan
University

Guidance 2

GUIDANCE ON READING AND READING LOGS

2008 onwards

http://www.ioe.mmu.ac.uk/cpd/

Guidance on Reading

An essential feature of any University Course is the student's engagement with literature; the importance that the Professional Development Programme places on this engagement is reflected by the prominence that literature has in the criteria of assessment. The following advice is to help students organise their reading and bibliographical information, so that they can make best use of it when preparing assessment and participating in lectures.

Reading Log

A reading log is a diary which contains your ongoing record of reading as you progress through the course. This will help you when you are writing assignments, both in terms of recording accurately the bibliographic details of literature, as well as helping you select appropriate literature for the assignments. There is no set format for a reading log, but the following suggestions are intended to give you the broad idea.

It should contain full bibliographic details of literature using the format outlined in the Guidance 1, Guidance on References, Quotations and Bibliographies It should indicate when the literature was read, so you can check for new editions. Each piece of literature should be annotated. This means that there should be a short note of what was significant about the literature, for example, there could be a list of keywords, or a note of the significant themes in the literature.

A reading log can be a paper-based file, a card file index or it can be developed using a dedicated computer Bibliography database, such as "Endnote". Students might find it useful to bring their reading log (or a print out of it) with them when they meet their tutors for guidance tutorials.

Paper Based Log

It may be a good idea to have the log in an A4 folder, so that it can be continually added to and revised. Guidance 1, Guidance on References, Quotations and Bibliographies could be in the front of the folder, so that reference can be made to them when necessary. The advantage of a folder is that it is both portable and compact; keeping all your notes in one place.

Card Index Files

Some students have found it easiest to build up a card file index of bibliographical details, using a standard format on the cards, and even having both subject and name indexes. When constructing your bibliography for an assignment, it is very easy to collect all the appropriate cards, sort them into alphabetical order, and then write the bibliography in the correct sequence.

Computer Based Log

The use of computer based reading logs has increased with the sophistication of the software available. In particular there are packages such as Endnote that not only keep your records in order, but will also construct your bibliography for assignments and essays. If you are using a University computer in the drop-in or library, you will find bibliographic software on them. Conversely, commercial software such as Endnote or Papyrus offers special rates for students (including part time students)

The great danger of all computer based systems is their vulnerability to break down; it is essential that if using a system like this, that it is securely backed-up on a separate floppy disc. Obviously students would need to bring a hard copy of their reading log with them when attending tutorials rather than their computers!

Reading Strategies

There is no doubt that reading is one of the most challenging aspects of any part time course of study. It also recognised that no one strategy will fit every student's needs or lifestyles. The suggestions here reflect strategies that other students have found useful whilst following a course on the professional development programme.

One thing the different strategies show is that the more successful students are those who integrate reading and studying into their working lives. If students only turn to reading when they have an assignment to complete, it is unlikely that they will get the best out of the literature or complete the assignment as successfully as they might have done.

Making a Niche

For some students, the setting aside of time each week in which they read is the most sensible way of organising their reading. One student noted how she had decided at the beginning of the academic year, that she would read one journal article a week for the duration of the year. What it meant in reality was that for one lunchtime each week (or two if it was a particularly long article) she ate her lunch in her classroom and read, rather than sitting in the staff room with her colleagues. As she pointed out to her tutor, she was a little staggered to realise that by the end of the academic year, she had read and annotated nearly forty articles!

Using the library

A number of students remark on how addicted they get to reading in the library. The opportunity to sit quietly and read, with no distractions competing for one's attention means that often a short time can be rewarded by very intense attention to reading. One student pointed out that he made a point of getting to the University as early as possible on his lecture nights. He had found that by sitting and reading for twenty or thirty minutes, it put him in the right frame of mind for hearing the lecture and engaging in the debate.

Sharing literature with a reading circle

An increasingly useful system for studying at all levels is the use of a circle of colleagues or fellow students. In the case of reading, a small circle will read different literature and then swap ideas and criticisms of it. This ensures that reading is done with an "audience" in mind, and stops one reading without paying due attention. It also means that one's critical thinking is being constantly sharpened through the discussion and debate.

Balancing lecture time and reading time

For some students the opportunity to read has to be struggled for, and they tend to read through the holidays or at the weekends. One student in discussion with a tutor talked about two aspects of this in particular; the need to organise your research time in the library so that you were being time efficient and the need to achieve a balance between reading and attending lectures. Many students are surprised to discover that there is an assumption on the part of tutors that they read for about fifty hours per module. This essential reading should be guided by booklists both in the Module Handbook and in other lists distributed by module tutors. In addition to this, students are expected to read around issues and areas, as they become important because of assignments.

Researching Literature

There is no doubt that the most successful students have developed good skills at researching literature; they are able to use the different search facilities described in GUIDANCE7 ACCESSING ELECTRONIC RESOURCES well, usually because they have practiced and asked for support from library staff. It is vital that any searching for relevant literature is systematic, uses the correct tools and is based on thought and care. The worst way of searching is to go and "rummage through the library shelves or journals"! Have a plan and stick to it, calling for help and advice from librarians whenever necessary.

Literature on the "net"

It is not unusual for students to try and access literature on the net through the use of "Google Scholar" or even through a straight forward search for web sites offering information. There are a number of inherent dangers in this proposition. Firstly, websites are not usually acceptable as sources of academic literature; frequently they are more akin to propaganda for a particular view or cause and offer uncritical acceptance of that view. Secondly they rarely reveal who has written the material on them, or acknowledge the sources that the writing has drawn on. Thirdly, websites (especially those marketed as "academic" sources, frequently offer only an abstract of an article or an overview of the research; this presents the student with the temptation to pretend they have read an article in an often obscure journal when they haven't. The consequences of this are poor marks or worse still failing marks. If a writer has got credibility within the field and has views which are seen as worthy of critical consideration, they will have undoubtedly written in academic journals. Taking a short cut via the net rarely proves a good idea.

In conclusion

These Guidance Notes are not intended to be exhaustive on the contrary, they are intended to help you think about which strategies work best for you. The more that reading can become a part of your everyday life, then the more useful it will become in your writing and participation in lectures.

Further Reading

Barnes, R (2005) *Successful study for degrees [3rd. Edt]* London, Routledge

De Fazio, T (2002) *Studying part time without stress*. London. Allen & Unwin

Fairbairn, G & Fairbairn, S (2001) *Reading at University: a guide for students*. Buckingham, Open University Press

Metcalfe, M (2006) *Reading critically at university*. London, Sage

Payne, E & Whittaker, L (2006) *Developing essential study skills [2nd. Edt]*. Harlow, Prentice-Hall

Wallace, M & Wray, A (2006) *Critical reading and writing for postgraduates*. London. Sage