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# Introduction to Part A: key points for reading at university

The types of books and articles you read at university will probably be different from those you used at school or college. Why and how you read at university will also be different, requiring more independence from you in deciding what to read, higher levels of concentration and more questioning of the material. Finally, as you will have seen from the main introduction, the way in which reading is used in academic essays makes this type of writing quite different from work you may have done up to now.

## Part A gives you:

- important information and strategies to take you through the process of reading and of using this reading in your essays in the form of quotation, paraphrase or summary;
- real academic articles, real student writing and an excellent short student essay to demonstrate each stage of the process; short practice exercises on all of the points covered.

It is best to go through each section of Part A in order, but you can also read and re-read different sections as and when you need.

### Five key points to remember about reading

- A common reason why students struggle with reading at university is simply that they do not give enough time to it, and so don't enjoy it because of the stress of trying to fit too much reading into too little time. Reading and thinking is where most of your learning and creativity will happen, so take it seriously and make reading a priority in your time management schedule.
- Identify your purpose for reading a book or article and decide what it is you want to learn from it, and then be flexible in how you read, matching your reading method to your reading purpose. You may need to read some articles from start to finish, but for other texts you may only need to scan briefly or read just one particular paragraph in detail.
- Try to engage with the material rather than just reading the words on the page. This means being (or becoming) interested in what you are reading, and thinking about what the author is doing and trying to say. This will greatly improve your understanding and will further increase your interest in the subject.
- Some of the books and articles you need to read may seem complex, formal and difficult to understand at first. Everyone approaches reading in a slightly different way and it may take

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a little time to build up your 'reading muscles' and to discover what works best for you. Start by reading short articles or short sections before tackling longer ones; as with everything else, you will improve with practice. Bear in mind that most people need to re-read complex texts, and that the struggle to understand is a normal part of taking in new information.

- Reading will also help improve your writing skills by increasing your knowledge of new words and your awareness of how to structure a piece of written work. Bear in mind however, that not everything you read will be well written.

# How do you decide what to read?

It seems obvious that for a good essay you need good sources, but what exactly *is* a ‘good’ source? When looking for sources, don’t be tempted to just type your essay title straight into an online search engine in the hope that something useful will come up. Knowing what types of sources are suitable for university work, and spending some time thinking about what information you need before you start searching, will save you a great deal of time and will result in a much better piece of work. This section gives you the key steps and information you need for finding the best sources for your essay.

## Five steps for deciding what to read

### Step 1 Think: what question do you want to answer?

Do some thinking before you start searching for sources. Check that you really understand the title of your essay. For example, does the title ask you to develop an argument, give your opinion, give examples, or some of these things together? Does it ask for definitions, information on a process, advantages and disadvantages or for different views on an issue?

Rewrite the title in your own words – this will really help you to understand it. For example, the business ethics essay title could be rewritten as: ‘Give a brief overview of what business ethics is and then argue that business ethics either is or is not important, giving your reasons for your view’.

### Step 2 Think: what do you already know about the topic and what ideas do you already have?

Think (and perhaps write down) what you already know and think about the essay question. For the business ethics essay, you would ask yourself what *you* think business ethics is and whether *you* think it is important. You will probably also have already done some reading and discussion on the essay topic during your course, so think about what you have already read that is relevant.

### Step 3 Think: what types of source will you need?

Make notes on any suggested reading and other instructions about sources your tutor has given you. Think about what types of sources you will need to answer your essay title.

For example, which of the following will you need?

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- an introductory textbook to give you some initial ideas;
- chapters in more advanced textbooks;
- important major works on the topic;
- original data from experiments or other research;
- recent academic journal articles on new developments or ideas on the topic;
- non-expert or public opinion on the issue.

For the business ethics essay, after thinking about the essay title, the student decided to look in some current academic textbooks for definitions of business ethics. He also read some relevant journal articles and reports by key authors for their views on the importance of business ethics, and he also decided to look at some company websites to find out what businesses themselves say about business ethics.

### **Step 4 Do a first search**

Decide how good you want your essay to be and how much time and effort you are willing to give to finding appropriate sources. Then use your thoughts on the types of sources you need to start searching. Looking for sources is called a literature search, and it is a vital part of academic research. As you search, keep checking that your sources are relevant, specific and reliable (see below).

Content pages and chapter headings of books and journal article abstracts can help you to decide whether a source is relevant. Reading the introduction and conclusion of a book chapter or journal article is also a quick way of finding out whether a source will be useful. The reference list at the end of one book or article may provide you with details of further useful sources.

It is important at this stage to write down the precise details of each source you think you might use (author, date, title, journal/publisher) and also where and how you found it. You may not think this is important but you will be surprised how useful this information is, and remember that for academic work, *who* wrote something is as important as what they wrote about.

### **Is it better to use the library or to do your own online search?**

With so much material available online, some students don't go near their university library until the end of their second year or later. This is a real shame because your library can help you with some of the very problems that arise from information overload. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the internet is just like a big online library – it isn't!

### **Searching for sources using the university library**

#### *Advantages*

- Material has already been pre-selected by lecturers and library staff for its importance, relevance, reliability and academic quality.
- The intranet and library catalogue material (again, chosen by your tutors/library) are more likely to be reliable than material from the internet.
- Library staff are there to help you with selecting and finding texts.
- Has an online catalogue system that contains all its resources. Will also give you free access to other academic online databases.

- You can use the 'sort' facility of the library catalogue to put sources in order of publication.
- Has primary printed material and back copies of journals, newspapers and magazines that are not available online.
- Has specialist dictionaries, study guides and material written by your university not available online (e.g. advice on how to reference your work).
- Provides a quiet and comfortable environment in which to study, away from distractions.
- Has free Wi-Fi connection and use of DVDs
- Has free use of magazines and newspapers, dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other print material.
- Will probably have agreement with other libraries.

#### *Disadvantages*

- The copies of a book or article may be out on loan (but you can reserve them!).

### **Searching for sources using the internet**

#### *Advantages*

- A huge number of sources are available.
- 24 hour access every day of the year (although your library may also be open 24 hours a day).

#### *Disadvantages*

- Search engines will often return a large number of returns and false matches, and so it can be hard to find the most relevant source.
- It is sometimes difficult to find out who wrote something and whether the source is reliable and peer-reviewed.
- A significant number of academic sources are not yet available online.
- You often have to pay for downloads of complete books or articles.

### **Step 5 Think, sort and select your sources for detailed reading**

When you have done your first search for sources, think again about what you will want to say in your essay and what you think your conclusion might be. This may change as you read more, but by now you should have some idea of how you want to answer the essay title.

You might need to do some general background reading on a topic, but most essay titles will ask for something specific, so try not to waste time by reading sources that are on the correct general topic but that are not specific enough. For the business ethics essay, you would not want to spend time reading about general business topics or about the meaning or history of ethics; you would need to focus specifically on *business ethics*. Even when you had found a book on business ethics, you would not need to read it all, just the chapters or sections which described what business ethics is and whether/why it is important.

Select your sources for more detailed reading and ask yourself the following questions about each source.

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- What type of source is it and who wrote it?
- Is it relevant and specific to my essay?
- Is it a reliable and academic source?
- Why exactly am I going to read it?
- Will it probably support my conclusion or give an opposing viewpoint?
- Will I probably use it as an important piece of information or only as a minor source?

### **What is a reliable source?**

At university you are expected to make sure that your sources are reliable – that you can trust what they say. This usually means knowing who wrote something and that they are an authority on their topic. Reliable sources are usually those that have a named author, as this ensures that you reader knows who is accountable for the information given. Anonymous sources are much more likely to be of poor quality and/or contain incorrect information.

Up-to-date information will probably be more reliable than older information, so check when your source was written. You may want to read older sources that are key texts or to build up your knowledge, but for most topics you will also need current sources. Always check online sources to see when they were last updated and whether any links are active.

A reliable source is also one that gives information that is as accurate and complete as possible, rather than giving only the information that suits the author's purpose. Business and political organisations for example, may present information in a biased way. However, you need to think about what 'reliable' means for the type of information you need. If your essay is about public opinion in the media, then newspapers and television programmes would be a reliable source for this particular type of information. Equally, if you are writing about the views of different political organisations, their leaflets and websites would provide reliable information on what these views are, even though such information may not be balanced or reliable in the general sense of the word.

### **Are abstracts, reviews and summaries reliable sources?**

These are all useful in different ways to give you a general idea of a text, but are not reliable sources in themselves as they do not give enough detail.

#### **Article abstracts**

Written by the author. Abstracts give an outline of the argument but not always the conclusion. You will not be able to evaluate the evidence, argument or conclusion of the article fully just by reading the abstract.

#### **Summaries of a book or article**

Could be written by the author or by someone else. A summary does not provide enough detail for you to be able to evaluate the evidence or argument of the source.

### **Article or book reviews**

Always written by someone else. If the review has been written by an expert, it may give you useful information about the context of the source and other published work in the field. However, reviews are of no use for detailed information and may often be the biased, personal opinion of the reviewer.

### **Introduction and conclusion of a book or article**

Written by the author. Reading just the introduction and conclusion of a source will give you a good idea of the main points and argument, but are not enough for you to evaluate the evidence or argument of the whole article, section or book.

### **Primary and secondary sources**

Try to find the original (primary) source of information where possible, as something that is reported second or third hand may not be accurate and will be relatively unreliable. If you want data on the results of an experiment, try to read the original report rather than use an article that discusses the experiment second-hand (this is called a secondary source). Similarly, if you want to write about what an expert has said, read the actual book or article they have written rather than an article by another author who discusses what the expert has said. In reality, it will not always be possible or necessary to use only primary sources, but your tutor will usually expect you to read the key primary sources on a topic.

For the business ethics essay, the student found some primary material about companies from their websites. The textbooks and articles he used were partly primary material but they also discussed the previous work of other experts and so also acted as secondary sources of the material they used. Several of the articles mentioned a key text written by Albert Carr in 1968, so the student made sure that he found and read this primary source.

## **What is an academic source?**

For most university assignments you will need to use information from sources that are not only reliable but are also regarded as academic. Academic sources are those written by authorities on a topic and which have usually been peer-reviewed. The peer-review process is when the book or article is sent by the publisher to other experts for checking and discussion before being published. Peer-reviewed sources are reliable, and are called academic (or reputable or authoritative) sources because they have been written by people who have attained a high standard of knowledge and research in their subject. Reliable and academic sources always have a named author or organisation. The academic community relies on knowing who wrote what, so that academics in a particular field can question, discuss and work with each other to build knowledge and develop ideas.

### **Non-academic sources**

Below is a list of source types which are not academic and should not normally be used as sources for university essays:

- encyclopedias (including Wikipedia, which is an online encyclopedia);
- college-level textbooks;
- newspapers (including long articles in quality papers such as *The Times* or *The Guardian*);
- magazines (including quality magazines such as *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and *New Scientist*);
- news or TV Channel websites (e.g. the BBC News);
- trade publications and company websites;
- publications and websites of charities, campaign or pressure groups;
- student theses or essays;
- pamphlets and brochures;
- blogs and wikis.

## Checking that your sources are academic

Books and journals on the library shelves and on your reading lists will usually be reliable and academic. However, you may want to find other sources, and you will need to make the effort to check that these are also reliable and academic. Books have normally gone through a peer-review process and so are usually reliable. Journals described as an academic journal, a peer-reviewed journal or a scholarly journal will be reliable and academic.

### Check your online sources

Take particular care when you are using online sources. Your tutor will suggest suitable places to search online but it is your responsibility to check that your sources are reliable and academic. Wikipedia may be useful for some initial definitions and to give you links to other sources, but you should not use it as an actual source in your essay. This is because Wikipedia is a type of encyclopedia and is therefore only a basic summary and a secondary source. It is also anonymous and is not peer-reviewed and is therefore not reliable and not academic.

Words that should warn you that an online article is probably not academic are: *magazine, digest, personals, news, press release, correspondent, journalist, special report, company, classified, personals and advertisement*. However, don't be fooled into thinking that an online article is reliable and academic just because it is well-written and has an author's name, includes statistics and has in-text references. Even words such as *journal, research or volume/issue number, Society or Research Centre* are being increasingly used by unreliable and non-academic sources and websites. You need to check that the article is in fact from a peer-reviewed journal.

### Check your online databases

Some online databases contain only peer-reviewed academic journals, but some of them (even one which describes itself as a 'research database') also contain newspapers, magazines and trade publications. Read the description of the database before you go into it – what does it say it contains? You may be able to google a database and get a description of its publications from the 'home' or 'about us' page.

Remember – always check whether an article is academically reliable, even if you have found it through a database.

### Check your web search engines

Search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Bing are not usually appropriate or helpful when searching for academic sources. Google Scholar is better, as it contains only literature related to academic work, but you still need to be careful, as not all of this literature is peer-reviewed material – Google Scholar also includes some magazines and student theses.

### Where to check a website

If you are not sure about the reliability of an online website, article, database or search engine, try to find its homepage and look under sections such as ‘about us’ ‘contact us’ ‘editorial board’ ‘board of directors’ ‘information for authors’ ‘submission process’ ‘sponsors’ ‘funders’ and ‘partners’. These sections will give you information about who runs and supports the website, and whether its articles are peer-reviewed.

## Practice 1: would you use these sources?

Read the descriptions below of ten potential sources for five different essay titles. Do you think these sources are not reliable, reliable but not academic, or reliable *and* academic?

### Sources for an essay on government support for people with disabilities

- 1 An article written in July 2006 in an online magazine called ‘Mobility Now’. It has news, information and stories and is a magazine for people with disabilities. It is published by a leading charity organisation for people with disabilities.

### Sources for an essay on youth crime

- 2 A recent online article on ASBOs written by Jane Smith, Home Correspondent. The URL is the online business section of a national quality newspaper.

### Sources for an essay on recent developments in stem cell research

- 3 An online article on stem cells, published jointly by three authors in 2009. The article has a date, volume and issue number. The article is on a website called ‘Stem Cells’. This seems to be the title of the journal and at the bottom of the page there is a publisher: Beta Res Press. In the ‘information for authors’ section, the website tells authors how to track the progress of their article as it goes through the peer-review process.
- 4 Three different online science publications with similar titles that all look like magazines. They all have news sections, advertisements and jobs sections. They all have issue numbers and two of them also have volume numbers.
  - 4a The first one has an ‘about us’ page that describes how its correspondents get their information by contacting leading scientists, reading scientific journals and websites and attending conferences.
  - 4b The second magazine has the name of an organisation at the top of its website. On its ‘about’ page it describes the magazine as its journal, and states that it is a peer-reviewed

general science journal. Another page states that its board of directors consists of university academics.

- 4c The third publication has no 'about us' information. Wikipedia describes the magazine as 'a well-respected publication despite not being peer-reviewed'.

**Sources for an essay on developments in animal cloning**

- 5 An article from a printed booklet titled 'Animal Cloning' published in 1999. There is a series of booklets, each with a volume and issue number. Each booklet contains a collection of short articles and newspaper and magazine clippings which give a simple introduction to issues and public debate on a scientific topic.

**Sources for an essay on business ethics**

- 6 A well-written report (which starts with an executive summary) on business ethics in companies. The website is run by an organisation called SEB – Social Ethics in Business. On the 'about' page, the organisation describes itself as part of a network of business organisations that focus on corporate responsibility. Its funders and partners are large national and international business foundations and development agencies.
- 7 An online article titled 'Business Ethics Guidelines'. The website address is 'Harold Jones International Company'.
- 8 An online article about McDonald's on a website called 'Centre for Management Research'. There is no 'about us' page but there is a homepage stating that the centre is involved in business research, management consulting and the development of case studies and training materials.
- 9 An online article on business ethics found on the website of the 'Centre for Business Ethics' of a university. On the centre's homepage it states that it helps businesses and the community, and offers workshops, conferences and lectures. It also states that the centre publishes its own *Journal of Ethics*.
- 10 An online article about a drinks company's activities in India. The article has no author but is well written and says 'for immediate release' at the top of the page. The website is titled as a 'Resource Centre'. The 'home /about us' page states that the centre has evolved from networks and discussions by activists, and describes itself as a platform for movements to publicise their demands and apply pressure to governments.

*(The articles and websites are fictitious but are closely based on real examples).*

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