

## How not to fall asleep in the library

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**'I'm a very slow reader, and I tend to get distracted when I'm reading. I've been known to fall asleep in the library. I find a lot of the stuff I have to read is very difficult to understand, even after reading it several times.'**

- First-year sociology student

Problems like these are not at all uncommon. You may have seen other students in the library nodding off, so if it happens to you, you know you're not alone.

But why is getting to grips with reading so stressful? I suspect there are two factors at work. One is the specialized language that academic publications are written in; the other is the way you are approaching your reading, as though your task is to 'take in' everything in the book or journal article.

### **The language of academic subjects**

Every academic subject has its own language, its 'academic-speak'. In some cases this is a technical jargon, with made-up words and expressions; in other cases the words and expressions used are ordinary English, often colloquial, but the meanings are unusual and special to the subject.

It has also long been the fashion for academics to write in a complicated and convoluted way. As Anthony Giddens, former director of the London School of Economics, put it in an interview reported in the *Times Higher* on May 28, 2004:

I'd spent most of my life writing books for an academic audience, and I used to make these more obscure than they needed to be because that sort of brought you esteem for your scholarship.

So academic language is difficult for the newcomer. It has to be learned, and that takes time and effort. Read on for suggestions as to how to set about it.

### **Your approach to reading**

Just about everyone who has made it into higher education takes it for granted that they know how to read. Basically, you begin at page one and continue reading until you get to the end, when you stop. When you take this approach you're operating on the 'absorption' model of reading: you're aiming to soak up great masses of stuff. But the human brain is not well suited to doing this. If you get distracted easily or fall asleep, what's happening is that your brain is sending you a message: 'You're giving me a really hard time! Do not make me do this!'

If you're getting this 'distress signal' message from your brain, pay attention to it. There are two things you can do to improve your reading strategy: change your idea of 'reading', and learn academic-speak as you would a foreign language.

### **Change your idea of 'reading'**

Take a different model. Think of reading not as soaking up masses of stuff but as a treasure hunt. You're looking for the gems, the pearls, that you need. Bear in mind that unless the book was written specifically

for students taking your course it will contain a great deal of stuff that you do not need to know, especially if you are encountering it for the first time. So look for key terms – if you’re reading because you have a class to prepare for or an essay to write, the assigned topic will supply these – and look for the author’s conclusions. These won’t necessarily be at the end of the book: they could be at the ends of individual chapters, or in the preface, the introduction or an abstract. Track them down. If you want to find out how those conclusions were reached, you can then go on to do the necessary detective work. (People tend not to fall asleep when they’re doing detective work!)

### **Learn academic-speak as you would a foreign language**

The second thing you can do is to treat the particular brand of academic-speak you’re faced with exactly as you would if it were a foreign language that you have to learn. So make a vocabulary book for yourself, with examples of the usage of the words and expressions you meet. You can develop this into a user manual for your course. And you can use the same approach for quantitative subjects too: it works for equations and diagrams in just the same way as for words and expressions in English.

Ideally you will become fluent in the academic-speak of the subjects you’re studying. If you’re a native English speaker and learned French at school, you probably remember that when you started, if someone asked you a question in French you translated the question into English, worked out the answer in English, and then translated the answer into French. Then one day someone asked you a question in French and you answered straight off in French. That’s precisely the level of fluency in academic-speak that you need to acquire.

And ask your teachers to give you a demonstration of how they themselves read. They can take a book or article and show you what strikes them as significant, and why, and what they pass over on a first reading. They can show you how they relate what they read to what they already know, and how they read critically, between the lines rather than taking the words on the page at face value.

If their subject is a quantitative one, they can similarly give a demonstration of how to ‘read’ a table of figures, a graph, a diagram or an equation. Just as with a piece of writing, there are skills of questioning and inferring that they can teach their students.

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