

How to cope with monster reading lists

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'I feel really intimidated by the huge reading lists I've been issued with. We're given these lists of books and chapters and articles we're told to read before a class, and it's far too much to do: I just can't cope.'

- First year history student

It's not unusual for students not to be told what the purpose of 'huge' reading lists is, nor for them to be given no guidance on how to use them discriminately.

Reading lists can be long because they are intended to be comprehensive and to equip you not only to take part in a class but also to write a first-class essay or exam answer on the subject. They can also be made long deliberately in order to provide choice, bearing in mind the difficulty of finding items in the library, and in the hope that different students will find different items, so between you all you will cover quite a lot of the list. So there are some benign reasons for long lists.

Less commendably, however, a list may be long because it has been added to over the years but never 'weeded' to remove entries that are out of date or obsolete. And I've also heard it said that sometimes reading lists are long because they are there to impress other teachers and validating committees, rather than to help students to learn.

What should you do?

Think about the topic. If it isn't in the form of a question, turn it in to one, then ask yourself: 'What information do I need to give an answer to it?'

Bear in mind that you aren't expected or obliged to read everything on the reading list before your class. Get hold of three or four publications on the list – preferably ones that are recent and, as far as you can tell, look likely to have the information you need and provide you with something to contribute to the class. See if you can find four or five points to contribute. A good selection might comprise two interesting (e.g. surprising) pieces of knowledge, one difference of opinion between the writers you've encountered, one observation on the difficulty of finding the answer to the question, and one new question which you would like to bring to the class.

Some teachers are in the habit, when taking a class, of firing questions at students, thereby turning what should be an interesting discussion into an ordeal for some of you. If a question gets fired at you and you can't answer it, you need a helpful form of words for a reply. Something accurate and straightforward like 'My reading hasn't helped me on that point' should do. If you're asked 'What have you read?' you can say, and contribute one of the items you've prepared.

Keep your eye on the assessment ball. If you'll be sitting an unseen exam at the end of the year or the semester, or if you'll have to write an assessed essay on the subject in your own time, notice what publications the teacher refers to and what points he or she makes in the course of the discussion. Use these to guide your future reading.

There are some things that you could ask your teachers for.

Tell them you would appreciate guidance on how to use their reading lists. If they don't already, ask them to distinguish between publications of central relevance - if they do already do this, tell them how helpful you find it - and those that make only a marginal contribution. And you could prompt them to weed out obsolete and unhelpful entries.

And ask your teachers to give you a demonstration of how to 'read' a reading list: ask them to go through a list in front of you, saying what each item brings to mind and identifying for you the clues in titles, dates etc. as to the likely importance and value of each item.

Remember too that every academic publication contains references, and by following up these references you can often track down useful nuggets of information and know-how. There's a skill to this 'tracking down' process - it's a kind of detective work - so ask your teachers to demonstrate this skill to you too.

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