How to read 10 books (or thereabouts) in an hour

Before you start ...

Think about what you hope to get out of reading this item. Are you aiming to:

• understand a concept?
• gather specific facts?
• identify the structure of an author’s argument?
• find alternative views so as to challenge an argument?
• keep your supervisor happy?
• demonstrate that you know who the experts in the field are?

How you read will be affected by what you want to get out of the text.

Reading strategies

**Skimming** means using the key structural elements of the text - its ‘skeleton’ - in a systematic, step-by-step way. It allows you to pick out the main matter without getting bogged down in the argument and evidence.

Each step takes you an increment further into the detail of the text: so after each step, ask yourself whether you’ve now got enough, or whether you want to proceed further.

For *journal articles*, read the following in descending order:

1. Abstract
2. Any figures or graphs
3. Introductory paragraph
4. Final paragraph
5. Headings

To take it further:

• First sentence of each paragraph

For *books*, read the following in descending order:

1. The contents page
2. First and last paragraphs of introduction
3. Any descriptive headings in introduction
4. First and last paragraphs of conclusion

If you’re interested in the topic covered by a particular *chapter* or *section*, use the same technique:

1. First paragraph
2. Last paragraph
3. Any figures or graphs
4. Headings

To take it further (if you want to spend more time on a chapter or section):

• First sentence of each paragraph

See [www.literaturereviewhq.com/how-to-read-a-literature-review-paper-in-5-minutes-flat](http://www.literaturereviewhq.com/how-to-read-a-literature-review-paper-in-5-minutes-flat) for more on how skimming works in practice.
Scanning means pulling out facts, statements or keywords from the body of the text to support your own argument, to inform yourself more widely, or to stay up to date with developments in your field.

It’s generally used when you already have a rough idea of the purpose and value of an item, obtained either by skimming it or from the item’s context (e.g. an article in a trade or professional paper).

- Run your eyes down the page rather than reading word-by-word
- Often used when you know roughly what you’re looking for already
- Look for specific words, phrases or facts
- Useful for locating new concepts or terminology in your field

Smart notemaking

Making notes is about futureproofing the work you’ve put in to your reading. If you leave your future self clues about what you found useful (or not) in the text, you’ll save yourself a lot of time, stress and unnecessary re-reading!

Make sure that you key your notemaking to your own research question or area of study. Keep asking ‘What’s in it for me?’.

Some notemaking strategies:

- Gutting the text
  Annotate and highlight it, recording your initial reactions and picking out sections that are relevant to your thinking. Useful if you keep a copy of the text, and also if you want to make a summary of it to keep elsewhere.
  - Tagging/summarising
    Give your reading keywords that are meaningful for you. Useful if you’re keeping hard copies (write the tags on the front page), but you can also add tags into reference software entries. Try adding a priority ranking according to how useful you think the text will be for your own work.
    A concise summary (a sentence or two) of the main argument and how it intersects with your work is handy if you can’t or don’t want to return to the original text.
  - Mapping
    Notes don’t have to be linear, or even in sentence form. If you find mind-mapping useful, drawing a conceptual map of the argument could be a good way to capture it.
  - Critical distance
    Try not to allow yourself to be swayed by rhetoric (persuasive writing) or ‘white rabbits’ - attractive lines of argument that lead away from your research question.
    One way to maintain critical distance is to answer back to the text: interrogate and question it, challenge the arguments.