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# 3

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## READING SKILLS

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### Key points

- You are reading for a purpose not pleasure
- Start by developing a process time plan
- Plan your reading time
- Think about key authors, time and dates

### Avoid

- Superficial reading
  - Too much in-depth reading
  - Failing to record the bibliographic details
  - Copying large chunks of text, instead of making relevant notes
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### Introduction

This chapter describes different aspects of reading skills which you might find useful. You are likely to read many varied types of non-fiction documents in order to write your literature review, and that is the same whether you are writing a traditional review or a systematic review. The material you are reading might consist of published literature reviews, or more abstract theoretical work. It could be purely research-based material, which in turn could be using qualitative or quantitative methodologies or even both. It might be project evaluation studies or officially produced policy reports. Whatever the type of document, the rationale is the same. You are reading for a purpose. You are reading for information and not for pleasure.

The concept of taking a *critical* approach was described in Chapter 1. Being a critical reader means making judgements about *how* an argument is presented in a text. You need to stand back from the work and have confidence in your own ability to be critical. This is usually achieved when you have a working knowledge and understanding of the issues and theories in a given topic. What happens is that you are able to move from surface (or information-seeking) reading to in-depth reading.

The key aspect to all types of material is that they were written with a particular purpose in mind and all tell a story. And that is what you have to do in your literature review – tell a story. So the skills you acquire as you read will automatically help you when you are writing.

### Time

One of the first things you should think about is time – how much time do you have and how much of that time can you afford to devote to reading. Plan the time you set aside for reading. We all have different reading strategies; some people prefer to spend several hours reading, others find short, concentrated bursts more effective. When tackling journal articles you may find that reading is best done in short bursts. So that means you could read an article inbetween other activities. If you set aside at least one hour a day for two weeks you should be able to read at least seven journal articles. In Chapter 1 we introduced the use of a Gantt time plan for a complete research project. It is equally important to have a time plan which includes a section on reading. Use it as a guide to mark your progress.

Let us assume that the proposed time for the activities of search, scan, skim, read and write for a stand-alone review will take three months, or one term, as shown in the Gantt chart in Figure 3.1. The schedule of activities is set out, along with the reporting schedule and delivery dates, ensuring completion of the work by the end of December.

		<i>October</i>					<i>November</i>				<i>December</i>			
<i>No.</i>	<i>ACTIVITY/TASK</i>	3	10	17	24	31	7	14	21	28	5	12	19	26
1	Decide topic													
2	Key words searching													
3	Scan and skim of text selection													
4	Reading and note making													
5	Synthesis													
6	Writing													

**Figure 3.1** Gantt chart for a three-month project

## Be analytical in your reading

The end point of your reading is to be able to write the literature review. The review will be based on your reading and your interpretation or analysis of the current knowledge. All the time you are evaluating what you read, reflecting on what is there in order to appraise the worth of the work, which means you have to read efficiently. As Blumberg et al. (2005: 177) note when discussing the importance of reading: 'Reading for review differs from reading for pleasure as it requires the reader to distil the relevant information and unravel the reasoning.'

Critical reading is based on critical thinking skills. There are several excellent books on critical reading (such as Cottrell, 2005) that are useful if you need extra guidance. Cottrell describes critical thinking as a process through which you have to move in order to identify another author's positions, arguments and conclusions.

Evaluating the evidence from an alternative point of view, weighing up opposing arguments and evidence fairly and being able to read between the lines is a skill that can be developed fairly quickly. In the following sections you will see two mnemonics (that is a system of rules to help your memory): first, the EEECA model, and then the SQ3R model.

First, the EEECA model, which gives five possible approaches to reading:

- **Examine** or analyse the topic – try to examine it from more than one perspective.
- **Evaluate** or critique the topic, thereby making a judgement about it.
- **Establish** relationships and show how they are related.
- **Compare** and contrast the ideas – are they similar to other work or how do they differ from other work?
- **Argue** for or against something to try to persuade the reader to agree.

You need to be purposeful in your reading and avoid getting swamped by anything that is not central to your purpose. But at the same time keep an open mind – always allow space for serendipity, whereby you may find something unexpected or unanticipated. So, be clear why you are reading, be clear about what sort of document you are reading and how you are going to fit all your reading into your project time plan.

## Where to start

Be focused. It can be quite daunting when you are faced with a pile of textbooks or a stack of printed-out journal articles that you identified during your

literature search. So, take one resource, whether a book or journal article, at a time.

### Process

The process is guided by two key questions:

- 1 Is this reading relevant to your study? Is the information appropriate to the matter under consideration?

If yes,  
Continue.

- 2 Does this reading add anything to the arguments or information that you have already compiled?

If yes,  
Continue.

If no,

Add the reference to your bibliographic list. Make a note that it has nothing new to contribute so far, add your reading date and reference details in case you want to return to it again. Then set it to one side in a colour-coded file. You will probably want to take another look at a later date for further examination, as your understanding and insight develops.

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### Tip

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Remember this explorative reading phase is an iterative process (not a one off event): read, think and reflect, make notes, read, think and reflect, take notes, and so on.

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### Reading techniques – scan, skim and understand

It is known that surface readers take a passive approach to their reading, they try to memorise information so that they can recall what they read, but this approach lacks reflection and critical analysis. By comparison, a deep approach to reading means interacting with the material in order to understand it better. You have to be able to do both, eventually moving into deep reading.

- **Scan on the first reading.** Do a quick first reading to absorb the overall message. Does it confirm or refute, add to or contradict what you already know? Does the material seem plausible to you? In the process of doing this you are drawing on your own existing (tacit and explicit) knowledge, which will grow the more you

read. With scanning you may search for a specific focus. Move your eyes quickly across the page to find particular words, phrases or names. This is what we do when reading a newspaper or magazine.

- **Skim on the second reading.** Read more carefully this time, taking in details. Note or highlight with colour pens, or underline any particularly relevant sentences or paragraphs or concepts that you will want to use. Skim reading is to get a better idea of what is there. Read quickly to get the main points but skip over the details. Check that the document is still relevant to your needs.
- **Understand in the third reading.** By now you should be able to react to what you have read, and agree or argue with the author's position or stance. Understanding the detail is when you read every word to extract information accurately.

This section suggests that you read not just to look for facts but to look for interpretation. You want to see what the text says as well as how the author has presented the material. What perspective is dominant? What is the author's paradigm? You will be familiar with the idea of research paradigms, such as positivist or interpretivist, from your research methodology course. A paradigm is a way of seeing based on a cluster of beliefs which not only influences how research is carried out, but also how research findings are interpreted. However, the paradigm may not always be discernible in everything you read, for example, conceptual papers.

So you might start with the scan – skim – understand sequence. Another way to approach reading is to adopt the SQ3R technique, a technique that is advocated in many textbooks (Ridley, 2008). This also refers to three different types of reading.

- **Survey** the text.
- **Question** actively and look for answers.
- **Read** – and read carefully.
- **Recall** – break the text into sections that show the main ideas.
- **Review** – look back to see if you have missed anything.

Example 3.1 is a reflective paper which considers current ideas in public health. It shows how to work your way through a text to see what it is about. The example shows you how to mark up key sections of text (my underline has been added to the text). Use Example 3.1 to practise your reading and marking-up/note-making skills. Use colour pens or underline or add square brackets [ ] to mark up sections of the text. As you work through the example, you could highlight each of the three stated aims in one colour, highlight the evidence in another colour, the method in a third colour, and so on. Cover up the right-hand column and test yourself. The right-hand column shows how the text could be broken down.

## Example 3.1

Hanlon and Carlisle's 'thesis' speculating on a paradigm shift in human history, from a public health perspective (2008: 355–6)

Original text	Comments
<p><b>Introduction</b>  <b>This paper has a number of aims: <i>firstly, to consider the question of whether there are historical analogies with contemporary circumstances which might help us to make connections between past and present predicaments in the human condition; secondly, to highlight the underpinnings of these predicaments in the politico-economic and cultural systems found in 'modern' societies; and thirdly, to outline some of the questions prompted by this analysis, and to stimulate greater debate around the issue raised.</i></b></p>	<p>The first sentence of the introductory paragraph (which is quite long and needs breaking down into its constituent clauses) tells the reader what the authors are trying to do.</p> <p>There are four separate parts (italicised here)</p>
<p><b>The arguments we present have been condensed from complex research and theorizing from multiple disciplines, in line with a disciplinary tradition of drawing on knowledge from other fields. We are, however, aware that there are some tensions between evidence and speculation throughout the paper and have, wherever possible, sought to ensure that speculation is plausible and consistent with the evidence.</b></p>	<p>Sentences two and three set up the authors' position and methodology.</p> <p>The methodology makes claims to an evidence base, and is based on a specific reading of existing knowledge.</p>

In this way you can interact with the text, by taking a flexible approach to reading, rather than a sponge approach, which is soaking up everything you read indiscriminately. There are many styles of writing and some texts are not as clear as they could be, so you have to practice and learn by experience. Some authors use the opening sentences of a passage or section to establish their position and then follow up with the body of evidence and reasoning. Good writers will use keywords as signallers, whereas others do it differently and tell you the aim at the end of a lengthy introduction. However, be warned, there are some published articles where the reader has to work hard to find the aim of the paper and the position that the author

is taking. This may not actually be a 'good' article, but if the paper is relevant, persevere.

## Reading different types of material

This section offers guidance on reading books, journal articles and policy reports.

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### Tip

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This last sentence acts as a signaller or trailer – it is telling you what is coming next. Look out for them when you practise your reading skills.

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## Books

These tips for reading a book can equally be applied to other sources of information. Never start by attempting to read every sentence in a textbook. Use the following list as a resource – like a toolkit.

- First read the title and publication date. Is this a classic, seminal text or a new one which might challenge the current state of knowledge or paradigm?
- Read about the author, usually to be found in the biographical blurb on the cover. Is this author an authoritative author or a new one?
- Study the table of contents, read the chapter headings and subsection headings.
- If it is an edited text (where different authors each contribute a chapter) check whether you need to read all the chapters or just selected authors. The overview or first chapter will summarise each contribution.
- Examine the book. Familiarise yourself with the layout. Look at the structure, the topic, style, general reasoning, data, tables and references.
- Read the Preface to see if it is by a guest writer or the author. The main ideas and contribution to knowledge are likely to be summarised here.
- The Introduction will give signposts for the layout of the contents within the book.
- Read the beginning and discussion endings of each relevant chapter.
- Interrogate – ask questions. What is your research question/s and how do they relate to this resource? Is this resource mainly theoretical? Is it conceptual or does it present the results of an empirical study? Many articles will contain some or all of these components.
- Check for your own keywords in the index.
- Check the Bibliography or Reference list. Do you already know some of the authors and texts cited? If you have just started out you will find several new references cited in the list. Later in the process, probably not so many will be new to you. Then you know you have a fairly good coverage of the key authors and articles.

## Journal articles

The tips for reading a journal article are similar to those for reading a book. Journal articles are usually written by experts for other expert readers. Most published articles will have undergone the peer review process to assess whether they are suitable for the journal as well as to assess the quality of the work. If you are coming fresh to a topic, then reading a journal article may take more time than skimming a textbook. Lee and Lings (2008: 96), writing for graduates starting out on their research career, offer a telling insight into journal articles:

Because of the word limits set by journals there is a need for authors to be clear and unambiguous (in writing for journals), which gives rise to a dense and very exact writing style, with much of the padding we take for granted in other types of writing (for example, in books) removed. This style can be very difficult to read because it is generally not entertaining, every sentence contains some relevant information that the author considers important. Indeed you may find that you end up reading an article three times, each time at a different level and with a developing understanding.

As with reading a book:

- Read the title.
- Carefully read the abstract and note or highlight the keywords which match your own, or possible alternatives.
- Identify the main argument from the abstract if you can (you may find this is not possible – not all abstracts are well written).
- Look at the structure of the work as this is the author's framework, through which the knowledge is communicated. Look at section subheadings, tables, diagrams, figures, pictures, numbered or bulleted lists, maps, graphs, charts. These visual presentations often summarise important material.
- If the article reports an empirical study, look for any hypotheses and read the research methods section.
- Look for the author's political, theoretical or methodological positions.
- Follow up the relevant references cited and listed at the end of each article.
- Examine the summary and conclusions in greater detail. Any gaps in knowledge, areas of new research needed and novel ideas might be located here. This may help you to frame your research question.
- Note again – you are not reading for entertainment, but for a purpose.
- Look for submission, correction and acceptance dates at the end of the paper – this indicates how old the actual research is.

## Primary research articles

There is no set rule for the layout of articles in journals. However, medical and some research-based articles often follow a formula. In medical and scientific disciplines, this follows the IMRAD model:



- **Introduction** – why the author(s) decided to do the research.
- **Methods** – how they did it and how they analyse the results.
- **Results** – what they found.
- **Discussion** – what they think the research means and advances in knowledge.

Research studies based on primary research (new or field-based research as opposed to secondary or desk-based research) are known as empirical studies. They can be based on qualitative or quantitative research methodology, or they may be evaluation studies drawing on several paradigms and techniques. Table 3.1 summarises types of research design and the methods associated with each one. When reading a research article it is advisable to start by reading the methods section. In this way you are assessing or checking the validity, originality and importance of the paper – that is, its importance in the context of what we know already. If the methodology is vague, then you need to spend more time assessing the reliability of the data. In addition, note the date when the material was published and ask yourself:

- Is it the latest research or is this work now out of date?
- What was the research question and why was the study needed?
- What was the research design – was it appropriate to the question?
- What types of methods were used?

**Table 3.1** Types of research design and methods

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**Primary research** – the design usually consists of experiment, random controlled trial (RCT), cohort study, case control study, cross-sectional survey, longitudinal study, or case report. The methods are survey, interview, observation, group discussion. There are many scientific methods in experimental design that may be relevant.

**Secondary research** – takes existing data and reworks it, or asks fresh questions of it. This might be a simple overview at the beginning of an empirical article, a stand-alone traditional review, a systematic review, meta-analysis, economic analysis, or decision analysis.

**Business tools** – such as SWOT, PESTEL, Five Forces, Balanced Scorecard, EFQM, and marketing Ps are also used in management studies.

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## Grey literature: non-academic sources and policy reports

Grey literature is a term used for any document that is not an academic journal article. Technical reports, commissioned research reports, working papers, government policy reports all come under the grey literature umbrella (Wade et al., 2006). Grey literature is not formally published. It is typically written for a restricted audience and so is less easily available.

You may be writing a literature review which includes public policy reports. Many reports are written and published now by audit watchdogs, who are the

scrutineers of public services, for example, the National Audit Office, service inspectorates and parliamentary select committees. The process through which such knowledge is collated is somewhat opaque and relatively little is known about how they work or what sort of evidence they produce to inform their conclusions. This section concentrates on how to tackle a UK government Green Paper (consultation document) or White Paper (policy report). Remember – this is a government-produced document and therefore it will have a political bias.

- Read the Foreword, which is often written by the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State.
- Read the Executive Summary before you begin on the substantial body of knowledge in the paper. This is the important substance that the author wants you to read. Official reports tend to have an Executive Summary, whereas academic papers have an Abstract.
- Look at the chapter headings – how is the material organised?
- Read the text, trying to read between the lines, to see if anything important has been hidden and excluded from the Executive Summary.
- Next examine the Bibliography, because that will point you to other similar policy work and illustrate which academic perspective, if any, is prominent.

When you read the chapter contents in a policy report you will be building on tacit knowledge, using your pre-existing knowledge to frame what you see. So ask yourself, does the new policy tune in with and confirm existing policy or is it announcing a major change of direction? If it follows a change of government, what strikes you most about the contents?

There will be new buzzwords. For example, in health policy, the concepts of ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ appeared in the White Paper *Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation* (Department of Health, 1999) and subsequently became common currency.

Another feature of policy documents is that the tense is often in the future, noting ambitions rather than substance, as shown in Example 3.2 (see my underline). So, when you are writing and summarising the points you must remember to change the tense, unless you are quoting directly.

### Example 3.2

**A section from a government White Paper, the underline showing the use of the future tense (Department of Health, 2004)**

The Government is committed to ensuring that measures to protect children’s health are rigorously implemented and soundly based on evidence of impact. We will therefore monitor the

success of these measures in relation to the balance of food and drink advertising and promotion to children, and children's food preferences to assess their impact. If, by early 2007 they have failed to produce change in the nature and balance of food promotion, we will take action through existing powers or new legislation to implement a clearly defined framework for regulating the promotion of food to children. (Department of Health, 2004: 36, Para 59)

Another type of grey literature is commissioned research reports. This is where research consultants (often academic researchers) are commissioned and paid by an organisation to undertake a specific piece of research for the organisation. The final research report will have undergone several reviews by the commissioner until an agreement is made on the final version. This type of document should be assessed carefully, because unlike academic journal articles or books, the work is rarely subjected to peer review. The final report may be the version with which the commissioners are happy because it meets their organisational needs.

## Recording and note-making

At some point in your reading you will need to make notes. There are three main reasons for making notes:

- 1 To identify and understand the main points of what you read.
- 2 To help you recall what you have read.
- 3 To make connections across texts and authors so that you can rearrange them for writing the review.

More advice on note-making and writing follows in Chapter 4. Some of the issues that you might focus on when you are reading, and then interrogate the work by asking, are:

- What is the problem that is addressed by this document?
- What are the proposed theories or key ideas?
- How has the problem been investigated? What methods have been used?
- What are the results in terms of the problem stated?
- When was the work undertaken and published?
- Is it new or building on existing, older ideas?

This all helps you towards compiling your own review. Selecting what to write comes after reading each section in the document. As we suggest in the next chapter, you could set up your own standard procedure for recording information – known as a pro-forma (see Figure 4.1). If you write something

down, it makes it easier to remember and to then go on to provide your own summary.

Finally, we end this chapter with a few tips based on our teaching experience:

- Style and accuracy – incorrect interpretation can happen as a result of over-focused reading or possibly an over focus on individual words.
- By comparison, lack of focus can lead to being too superficial. This happens when you are still skim reading when you should be reading at a deeper level, looking for keywords in sentences and not understanding the story or the context in which the words are embedded.
- This in turn results in failing to draw out the implications of what is stated – not understanding the big picture.
- Look out for dates. The extract in Example 3.2 was published in 2004; it makes a commitment for 2007. This current book you are reading was written in 2010. So you would be able to research and find out what had actually happened and whether these targets were met.
- Dates are important because knowledge is not static. When writers new to academic writing prepare a review citing 'out-of-date' information as current thinking, they have clearly not understood or carried out an up-to-date search of journals.
- Be critical. Don't believe everything you read – experts can sometimes be wrong.

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### Summary

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This chapter should be of use to students returning to higher education after a break, who find the reading heavy-going and are not sure where to start. Doing a literature review is based on reading the work of others and making an individualised assessment or analysis of the work. This overview of reading skills emphasises the importance of allowing enough time to read and reflect, first, by noting the importance in terms of how you manage your reading time and, secondly, by advocating the use of a time plan. To help you read in a more structured and analytical way two mnemonics are recommended: the EECA and SQ3R models provide a structured approach to reading critically. Your approach to reading will vary depending on what type of document you are looking at. Although the procedures for tackling academic books and journals are similar, empirical research reports are likely to be presented in a more structured IMRAD format. Particular care is needed with reading and assessing grey literature and public policy reports. In Chapter 4 we expand on how you can move from your notes to writing.

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# 4

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## FROM MAKING NOTES TO WRITING

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### Key Points

- Making notes is important, it shapes what you write
- Notes have to be clear, logical and written in a consistent format
- Learn how to spot bias in your own writing and in other writers
- The analysis should attempt to be original

#### Avoid

- Making no notes at all and trying to summarise straight from the original text
  - Making notes in a random way, with no logical system
  - Forgetting where your notes came from by referencing them properly
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### Introduction

You will hopefully have learned by now how to make notes from lectures – you listen and have to decide what is important, possibly with some hints from the lecturer and the PowerPoint slides. Doing research is different because you have to decide for yourself what is important. This chapter links in with the previous chapter on reading; it assumes that you have a clear research question and have started your search for information, using keywords to identify relevant papers or books. You have been reading, but it is at this point that many students find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material that they have printed off. That is why it is so important from the outset to plan your work within your time constraints.

Reading, note-making and then writing the review is an iterative process. Some advice on note-making was included at the end of Chapter 3. Here we consider other aspects that are important in leading you up to a finished product. Once ideas begin swirling about in your brain you need to capture them – otherwise, like butterflies they will fly away. So, get your ideas down on paper. Writing requires reflection and the process of reading – reflecting – writing

will help you to clarify what you are thinking. Reflection is an important process in undertaking research.

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**Tip**

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Keep a notebook and pen close to hand at all times, you never know when the ideas will come to you, or something you have puzzled over for some time suddenly clicks in your mind.

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When you make notes you are forming an opinion of each paper, an opinion which, at the doctoral level, will be original and hopefully innovative (in that as far as you are aware no other person has made the same interpretation that you have). There are five main reasons for making notes of what you read as you go along:

- To identify and understand the main points of what you read.
- To develop a way of rephrasing material in your own words.
- To help you reflect and think, concentrate on what is important and to recall easily what you have read.
- To make connections across texts and authors so that you can rearrange them for writing the review.
- To develop *your* own comprehension of the topic.

## Note-making

Critical *writing* depends on critical reading, reflection and the interpretation that you make of the document. There are three levels of note-making:

- 1 Noting what the text *says* – but you can as easily photocopy or highlight a paper copy.
- 2 Noting what the text *does* – this is mostly descriptive, it covers aspects of the text and begins your process of reflection.
- 3 Noting what the text *means* in relation to your question – this is when you are really focused.

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**Tip**

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When copying text or quotations, always put ‘inverted commas’ around your hand-written or typed-up notes to remind you that they are copied and note exactly where that resource came from, especially the page number.

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Recording text or quotations in the way outlined in the tip above should help you to avoid the problem of plagiarism. Plagiarism is covered in more detail in Chapter 9. One common error we all make when copying down a sentence or phrase from a text is to omit the page number. Nothing is more time-consuming or frustrating than trying to locate a page number to reference a quotation just at the point when you think you have finished. When you write up the review, the quotations will help to justify your argument, or illustrate the point you are making, but you must show where they came from.

Since your purpose is to learn, you have to make notes, and record the main points so that you can find the material again. Each person develops their own strategy for doing this. In essence, you are setting up a reading audit trail. This process can be done on computer, by typing up your notes and storing them as an electronic copy, but some people prefer to keep a hard paper copy as well as a back-up copy of the text annotated with the original marks.

### Annotated hard copy

Some readers like to start to read without a pen in their hand. If you can avoid reading with a pen in your hand you will resist the temptation to copy huge chunks of irrelevant details down. Only make notes when you have thought it through. Typically, you can underline and highlight on your own paper copy in a variety of ways. You can:

- underline keywords.
- highlight different sentences or passages using coloured highlighter pens.
- use the margins to jot down questions you want to find an answer to.
- note keywords and concepts.

Whether you prefer making written notes on a separate piece of paper or on a computer, record the page and paragraph of the relevant passages so that they are easy to find on the second and subsequent reading and when you write up the review. Most people find it easier to remember things when they have written them down or have colour-coded them. When you make notes always number the note sheets and code them by topic so that it is clear where the information came from. Figure 4.1 is a suggested format for recording some basic information on paper or electronic format.

### Electronic note-making

It is possible to set up notes pages in Endnote™ Bibliography, and then your reference details are together with the notes. Staff in the library or your institution can advise on how to do this.

### Visual note-making

Another form of note-making is to use a visual pattern of important issues. This can be in a mind map, or it can be a table, or a themed or column-based presentation. Many researchers use mind maps now to manage their material. This is a diagrammatic form of note-making. They are sometimes called relevance trees or spider grams (see Buzan, 2003). The idea is that you start at the centre of the page and work your way around the paper, adding topics or issues as relevant. Some researchers like to put a flipchart on the wall and then stick on 'Post Its', which can be moved around as their knowledge and understanding evolves. This is a way of showing important authors, themes, concepts or theory. You will find your own preferred method evolves with practice, by reflecting on what has worked and not worked for you in the past.

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#### Tip

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Use colour-coded paper, pens and folders to organise your work in different subject areas. Another idea is to use separate pages for each topic. You can use closed boxes, circles, apple or heart shapes, use different colour pens, add in stars, or any other tool to help you visualise the information.

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A colleague reminded me that if you have ever visited the office of an academic researcher you will notice that another tried-and-tested method is 'piles of paper on the floor or shelves' organised by subject and topic area. Each new note or document is then added to the top of the pile for later work. This behaviour is possibly a fail-safe way of storing information, an insurance policy against the frequent changes in technology and storage on portable discs, the most recent being the USB memory stick. But not all researchers behave in this way. Modern IT resources were meant to reduce the temptation to print a paper copy of everything interesting. It is highly likely that you will have a pile of print-outs when you undertake a literature search and review, so they need to be organised in some way.

The next stage is to begin to bring together and analyse what you have found out. By this stage, you should have highlighted paper copies and some handwritten notes, such as those shown in Example 4.1. But this doesn't bring your analysis together. Try writing one page for each text as this forces you to summarise into manageable amounts (you have to decide for yourself how much that is – 'manageable' is one of those weasel words that actually defies definition). You are trying to write a new and integrated interpretation, so try to be original by producing new ideas or conclusions. Summarise. Then,



finally, put it into your own words. Invent a way of identifying your own words and observations, not those of the author, for example by drawing a circle in red around them.

Source: title of the article, author, date. NOTES: p1/p2/p3
Time: _____
Place or setting: _____
Method: _____
Key findings _____

**Figure 4.1** A note making pro-forma

Table 4.1. shows the varying elements that could exist in a text that you might want to make notes about. The table shows where each element is likely to be within an article, so it is a guide to a quicker examination of a text. But there is also a warning – do not look just for specific information in isolation. You have to read the text critically to be able to comprehend the whole context and its conclusions. Note that Table 4.1 is a cumulative list in alphabetical order and not every document will necessarily contain all of these aspects. Be aware also that different disciplines will use different concepts (hence many of the terms in Table 4.1 are synonyms) so concentrate on the sections relevant to your own field.

## From notes to writing

### Context of time and place

Sometimes writers summarise the work of another author, so you will be reading it at third hand. Do not take everything you read on face value. Question the authenticity and accuracy. It is your responsibility to check whether the work has been accurately summarised and only the original source can provide that necessary quality check. Now, this type of checking may not be feasible for every original source. For instance, some material may be out of print or unavailable. Reading the original source is important if your review

**Table 4.1** Elements in a text to look for to find the information you need

<i>Column 1</i> <i>Introduction, problem statement</i>	<i>Column 2</i> <i>Theoretical section or chapters</i>	<i>Column 3</i> <i>Sections: chapters covering method, analysis, conclusion</i>
Definitions	Arguments	Conclusion
Events	Concepts	Design
Evidence	Evidence	Justification
Motives	Ethics	New research questions
Perspective	Hypothesis	Recommendations
Problems	Interpretations	Results
Questions	Justification	Summary
Standpoints	Styles of thinking	Techniques
Styles	Theory	

Source: Combined from Blumberg et al. (2005) and Hart (1998)

draws heavily on that specific work, and this does become more important at the doctoral level.

When reading and writing with a critical eye take care over the time line (ask when was the research done?) and geographical place (ask what was the setting and location of the study?). Think about the audience you are writing for – how relevant is the historical context or the geographical scope and the time line?

### More about time

One aspect of time to take into consideration is the original date of publication of the work of a key author. Knowledge is incremental. What we know now has been built up over centuries in some academic fields, such as philosophy, chemistry or biology. In other areas of study, such as in the social and management fields, knowledge has accumulated in just a few years. When writing, it is customary to mention the study which was published first, to give credit to the author who made the initial argument, theory or finding. Some classical works were written a hundred years ago, but should still be acknowledged. This will vary with the academic discipline and the type of literature review that you are planning to write, but if you are writing about suicide, then a reference to the seminal work of Durkheim would be essential. You should, of course, try to take a look at the original works if they are available and make your own interpretation. Inappropriate or inaccurate citation of published research is common; it can perpetuate false ideas and mislead you and other readers. Your task is to critically appraise existing knowledge, but you may be misled if your appraisal is at second or third hand.

The extract in Example 4.1 illustrates how your notes can be used to write a more informative review. Example 4.1 is a paragraph from the literature review (limit 1,000 words) taken from a postgraduate research proposal on 'Dividend policy in relation to the use of executive stock options for directors' (the focus was the UK). In a short proposal there is limited space to expand on each document, so the point being made here is not to be critical of the original student writer but to show how a review can be improved with a small addition of words to become more informative. The paragraph is headed 'Dividend policy and its determinants'. This example is to look specifically at issues of time line and place.

### Example 4.1

#### An illustration of the importance of time and place

This extract is a basic review paragraph on dividend policy and its determinants, taken from a student's original text, as submitted for assessment.

##### **Dividend policy and its determinants**

A few major theories have emerged in the attempt to unravel the dividend policy mystery. The clientele theory, put forward by Miller and Modigliani in 1961, suggests that investors chose to invest in companies with a payout policy that suits their tax situation and consumption requirements. In contrast, the dividend signalling theory states that managers' payout decisions signal to the market their view for the future of the company (Grullon et al. 2002 [student's original version has an error]; Michaely et al. 1995). Another possible explanation is offered by the free cash flow hypothesis. It argues that investors welcome increases in dividends because it reduces the control of managers by returning some of the free cash to investors. Thus limiting the amount of cash managers could invest in projects with negative present value (Jensen 1986). However, in practice, after conducting a survey on close to 400 companies in the US, Brav et al. (2006) [student's original version has an error] found that the views of management don't hold strong support for the theories presented above. (162 words)

My immediate observations of the text in Example 4.1 are:

- According to the anonymous student, we have five authors with three theories, with accounts beginning in 1961 and the latest in 2002. Using 'time and place' devices we can improve the work.
- The most recent paper cited (Brav et al., 2005) is based on a US study. On examination of the original articles (and from the journal titles) it is clear that all the papers are printed in American journals and all the authors are American. So one key point to make is that these are theories developed in the USA, but the student

study is about the UK. So one research question that can be asked – do these theories hold across economies?

- The studies cover research carried out over 20 years. So a research question could be: To what extent are the theories developed since 1986 still relevant in a 2009 economic context?

## Authors

Roni Michaely's name appears on three of the five papers cited in Example 4.1 (Michaely et al., 1995; Grullon and Michaely, 2002; Brav et al., 2005). This suggests that he is a leading academic on this topic. So it might be worthwhile doing a name search to find out what else he has written.

Taking these devices of 'time, place, author' into account, the paragraph in Example 4.1 could be rewritten as shown in Example 4.2. My additions or changes are in italics and I have removed the original underline from the references.

### Example 4.2

#### The Revised version of the basic review paragraph on dividend policy and its determinants from Example 4.1

A few major theories have emerged *from the USA* in the attempt to unravel the dividend policy mystery. The clientele theory, put forward *in a theoretical paper on dividend policy* by Miller and Modigliani in 1961, suggests that investors chose to invest in companies with a payout policy that suits their tax situation and consumption requirements. In contrast, the dividend signalling theory states that managers' payout decisions signal to the market their view for the future of the company (Michaely et al., 1995; Grullon and Michaely, 2002). *Michaely et al.'s (1995) work is based on an empirical study of dividend initiations and emissions for the years 1964 to 1988, using the New York stock exchange and other secondary data sources.*

Another possible explanation is offered by the free cash flow hypothesis. *This theory* argues that investors welcome increases in dividends because it reduces the control of managers by returning some of the free cash to investors. Thus limiting the amount of cash managers could invest in projects with negative present value (Jensen, 1986). *Jensen argued, taking the international oil energy market as a case study, that free cash flow theory of capital structure can also help to explain financial restructuring.* However, in practice, after conducting a survey of 384 financial executives and interviews with an additional 23 to determine the factors that drive dividend and share repurchase decisions in the USA, Brav et al. (2005: 484) concluded that 'management views provide little support for agency, signalling and the clientele hypothesis of payout policy'. (251 words)

## Writing: critical writing and types of argument

There are many excellent texts on study skills which take you through the process of making an argument, some of which you will have consulted earlier in your academic career, for example in study skills sessions and for essay writing (see, for example, Bonnett, 2001; Levin 2004; Currie, 2005). The following section offers some key reminders of the common core concepts.

An 'argument', in this context, means putting forward reasons to influence the reader, supported by evidence. An argument (in the academic meaning of that word) is a form of intellectual engagement with a reader (or listener). It should be constructive. The point here is to persuade the reader with *your* argument. It is not an argument about the person (or writer), but it is an argument about the substance of the work, the ideas and assertions, or theory and evidence, or conclusions that an author has made.

Your review may contain a mixture of all these forms of writing – the ideas, assertions, theory and evidence or conclusions. Quite often literature reviews written by those new to academic discussion are marked down. This is because there is too much description and not enough argument and explanation, reflection or analysis. You have to put an interpretation on the work. Here we have listed six forms of writing which may appear in your review, although not all are arguments:

- 1 **A description or an assertion:** A description tells us how things are. It is not an argument. It is an account, always written from a certain point of view, to some purpose. A description doesn't explain.
- 2 **A model:** A model is usually a visual representation of something – it can be a flow chart or simple Venn diagram. Models are abstractions of often complex material.
- 3 **A theory:** A theory is a simple statement, usually based on a set of hypotheses related to a logical argument. If I do x, then y or z is likely to happen.
- 4 **An explanation:** An explanation tries to make something comprehensible and uses examples to justify why the writer thinks this way.
- 5 **An analysis:** An analysis is a critical account of the component parts or factors involved in something.
- 6 **Synthesis:** Synthesis is where you bring everything together, hopefully in a new and original way.

## Making a value judgement and bias

Bias is a pre-existing attitude, an academic mindset of preconceptions and taken-for-granted ideas or knowledge that is often subconscious. Bias means having an inclination or preference that influences your judgement, so that your analysis is not balanced or even-handed. Another way to describe this

tendency is prejudice, a concept often used in a pejorative way. To have a bias is to have a prior or specific disposition or attitude about something. The assumption that we can produce unbiased, objective and value-free research is at the heart of the scientific debate. We like to think we are impartial and objective – that is the positivist paradigm of science. But in reality it is difficult to shake off a lifetime of preconceived notions, attitudes and experiences – that is the realist paradigm. Subjectivity is the lens through which you look at the world. So, for example, it may be a feminist lens you see through, or a Marxist lens.

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### Tip

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Write down now what you think your bias and prejudices are. Consider: can you set them aside when preparing your review or is it appropriate to your field of research that you recognise and acknowledge them.

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### Critique

Remember that to critique academically means to give both positive and negative points about a paper, and to recognise both the strengths and the weaknesses. Do not believe that just because something is published in a journal there is nothing to critique: no research is perfect. Most authors begin by focusing on the positive aspects and then, depending on the text, might note contradictions with other writers, or comment on the discussion, or note gaps in knowledge still to be tackled. See also Chapter 1 where we noted that the peer review process can act as a gatekeeper to new ideas being published. So you need to give a balanced review – one where the outcome is equally valuable. An unbalanced project is one where only evidence which agrees with your pre-existing mindset or expectations is presented.

In real life, criticism generally means looking for faults and passing critical comments; so it is a negative act. On the other hand, critical analysis, in the academic context of writing, is a positive process involving reflection and evaluation in order to determine the value or quality of something. However, you need to develop the skills and the language to draw the reader's attention to it. Examine some articles and see how others in your discipline have done it.

Table 4.2 is a critique by Gourlay (2006) which asserts that 'Nonaka's proposition is that knowledge is created through the interaction of tacit and explicit knowledge involving four modes of knowledge conversion' (2006: 1415).

**Table 4.2** An example showing how a critique is put together: 'Conceptualizing knowledge creation: a critique of Nonaka's theory' (Gourlay, 2006)

<i>The original text</i>	<i>Deconstructing notes on the text</i>
In the Abstract The theory that knowledge is created through the interaction of tacit and explicit knowledge involving four modes of knowledge conversion is flawed.	This is the main point of Gourlay's critique.
The theory appears to have attracted little systematic criticism, at least not in management and organisational literature (2006: 1416)	This claim is based on an assessment of citations between 1994 and 2004.
The most far-reaching critique is in a neglected paper by Essers and Schreinemakers (1997).	Gourlay has found another critical article.
Another comprehensive but neglected critique (Jorna, 1998) .....	And another.
Jorna's critique centred on the neglect of previous research, while Essers and Schreinemakers', and Bereiter's critiques (Bereiter, 2002) were largely concerned with the consequences of the model.	This tells us why the others were critical of the original theory.

### Some comments on process

Be prepared for lots of redrafting and rewriting. The literature review should be clearly written and well structured with subheadings. Introduce signalling words, or pointers and linkages (as suggested below), that provide a map to lead the reader through the evidence so that the ultimate conclusion is justified. Identify the main points of your argument for the reader. Experiment with the structure and sequence of your review to find the best way to illustrate and communicate your ideas to the reader.

The following are examples of signalling words (Cottrell, 2005):

- **Similar opinions:** similarly, equally, likewise, in the same way.
- **Strengthening words** (words that strengthen your argument): in addition, besides, too, moreover, furthermore, it is different, besides, not only ... but also.
- **Alternative words** (words that argue against something): others argue that ... (but always give a reference source for 'others'), alternatively, it might/could be argued that ...
- **Rebuttal words:** however, on the other hand, nonetheless, notwithstanding.
- **Contrast or contradict words:** although, conversely, by contrast, on the one hand ... on the other hand.
- **Results and consequences:** as a result, as a consequence, hence, thus, consequently, because of this.
- **Concluding words:** therefore, in conclusion, thus, we can see that ...

Remember that the write-up may take you as long as the search for literature, the reading and note-making. Try to read your work out loud as this helps you to spot over-long sentences and/or incomplete sentences.

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## Summary

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This chapter has reinforced the assertion made earlier that good critical writing depends on close critical reading, reflection and the interpretation that you make for yourself. When it comes to note-making, choose the approaches that you find most useful and convenient for your purposes. That may be using a standard pro-forma, highlighted or annotated paper originals or notes stored electronically. Your notes can, if relevant, include features of each document, such as the context, the time of writing and publication, and anything relevant about the author, such as the place of writing and publication. An example of dividend policy theory illustrates this point. Moving from your notes to writing requires you to make an argument and not merely be descriptive. Using signalling words in your review reinforces the way you lead the reader through your review and helps you to avoid producing a 'shopping list'. We will pick up on the writing up process again in Chapter 6.

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