

Reading and the Web

Introduction

As a student at a university, reading is one of the most common academic tasks that you'll be asked to do. An increasing amount of reading will be from Web documents, whether course outlines, assigned readings, or research material. Reading Web-based documents poses three main issues:

1. the sheer number of documents that are available.
2. the linking between documents.
3. the eye strain and physical fatigue that can result from reading from a monitor.

Dealing with the first two problems requires efficient reading strategies. Information about reducing eye strain can be found in the Study Skills Tip Sheet Reading from Monitors.

Before you read:

Before you begin reading any document on the Web, define your goal or purpose.

1. Do you want to get an overview of what the document contains?
2. Do you want to read it intensively and take notes?
3. Do you just want to locate a specific piece of information?

Strategy 1: Getting an overview:

Skimming is a useful technique for gaining a general overview of a document's main ideas, issues, and argument, theoretical perspectives, etc. It involves a quick preliminary search for the main ideas by using the author's organizational cues, which include introductions and conclusions, headings and sub-headings, italics, summaries, etc. If you can identify the main ideas quickly, then you can decide whether you need to read a document intensively.

"Weeding out" useless pages is another way to reduce the amount you have to read, a particularly useful strategy if you're doing research for an assignment. Ask yourself the following questions:

Is it an appropriate source?

Anyone can create a Web site, so the quality or accuracy of the information presented has not necessarily been evaluated. It will be up to you to determine whether a document is an appropriate and valid source for your purpose. As an initial step, scroll to the top and bottom of the document to see who or which organization posted the document. If the source isn't immediately evident, try to find the "top of the site" page:

- click on the URL in the location bar
- delete everything after the last .domain
- for example, in the following URL, delete the text after .edu:
<http://www.casdn.neu.edu/~nucase/refdesk/bundick.html>
- hit enter

If the page that loads is a reputable source, then it is likely the document is reputable. However, do not assume that because the source is a university Website, the document is necessarily appropriate. Student Web pages, for example, may reflect their institution's URL. You may still need to apply other criteria for evaluating the document. (For a good Website on critically evaluating documents, see New Mexico State University Library's The Good, the Bad and the Ugly).

How is it organized?

One challenge with Web documents is that they can be organized in a variety of ways. When you open the document, try and determine how it is organized and thus where the relevant information is located. Skim the headings in the Navigation bars and frames to determine what areas are covered and how the subject matter is broken down.

Open heading links such as Overview or Introduction which can assist you in understanding what the author's overall aim or purpose is.

If there is a Site map (like a Table of Contents), open it to get an overview of the site. If you see a heading that looks relevant to your purpose, open that link and skim to see what type of information is available.

Some of the documents you come across may not have the above organizational features; they may be essays, scientific journal articles, or chapters in a book. Try the following techniques to get an overview of the document.

Essay/Article:

Read the title and first paragraph(s). Continue reading until you can identify the thesis/proposition/aim/objective of the paper. Survey the headings and sub-headings (if provided) to see which areas are covered. Read the first sentence of each paragraph and the last or concluding paragraphs where the author usually sums up the main ideas.

Scientific Journal Article:

Read the title and the abstract. The abstract will give you a summary of the entire article. If an abstract is not provided, read the introduction and concluding section.

E-books:

Survey the Table of Contents to see which areas are covered. Skim the introductory and closing chapters for the main ideas to be addressed and the main conclusions drawn.

Chapters of an E-book:

Read the opening and closing paragraphs. The main idea is usually contained in the beginning paragraph(s) of a chapter and is summed up again in the concluding paragraph(s). Look at the headings and sub-headings (if provided) and the first line of each paragraph. Finally, look at the summary and glossary of terms at the end of the chapter (if provided).

Strategy 2: Intensive reading:

If you decide to read a document intensively, then you have to cope with the links that are peppered throughout the text. What should be done with them?

How do you decide which links to follow?

Read through the document once, ignoring the links, to get an idea of the main points.

Once you've read the document, you can then go back a second time, this time following any links you think are important.

Because you know the content of the entire document, you're better able to judge the value of the linked information, place the links in context, and understand how they connect to the information and concepts contained in the original document.

Getting lost!

If you follow several links in a row (for example, moving from document A to document B to document C to document D...) and want to get back to your original document:

- In Netscape, click on the Go button in the top menu bar (rather than hitting the back button over and over). This shows a list of the sites visited through this particular window since Netscape was last activated.
- In Netscape you can always see a complete history of all the sites visited (including those through other open windows) within a specified time frame by clicking on Go - History. This could be in a different location, depending on the version of Netscape you're using. The time frame you want the History to show is set through Edit-Preferences.

The links interrupt the flow of your reading and interfere with your comprehension!

If the colour and/or underlining of the links is too distracting to ignore, you can try to set your browser's preferences so that the links will be hidden.

- In Netscape, go to Edit-Preferences-Appearance-Colors.
- Choose whether your preferences will override whatever coding has been put in the page.
- To hide the links, choose black (or whatever colour the text is) so that they blend with the rest of the text.
- Turn off underlining.

Once you've done the initial reading, you can re-set the preferences to show the links again. When you read the document again, you then follow the links.

If you don't want to take the time to re-read the document, another option is to open the links you

want to visit in a new window as you read along. To do this in Netscape,

- Right click on the link.
- Choose Open in New Window from the list that appears.

There is a maximum of about 7-8 new links that can be opened before you overload and crash Netscape, so be sure you don't open too many new windows. Since Netscape automatically takes you to the new window you've opened, you will have to return to your first window to continue reading.

- Click on Go in the top menu.
- Click on the document which will appear at the bottom of the drop down list. OR
- Click on the little box containing the first document's name in the Taskbar at the bottom of the screen in Windows.

You'll be able to read and comprehend the document more easily, with only the brief distraction of opening new windows and clicking back to the first one. When you've finished reading the document, you can then go back and read the linked documents, each of which will be nicely contained in its own window, and listed in the order you opened them.

Keep in mind you can always see a complete history of all the sites visited (including those through other open windows) within a specified time frame by clicking on Go - History or Communicator-Tools-History, depending on the version of Netscape you're using. The time frame you want the history to show is set through Edit-Preferences.

Taking Notes:

When taking notes from Web documents, you have three choices:

1. Print the information you've found and then take notes or highlight as you would from any academic material.
2. Open up your word processing program. (If that's not on the computer you're using, then open Notepad.) Type in your notes from the document. Still not an ideal method, particularly if there are long passages you want to quote.
3. Another option, although it too has drawbacks:

1. Use your mouse to block a useful piece of information from the Web site and copy it (Edit-Copy) into the Windows clipboard.
2. Open a new document in your favourite word processor, or if that's not on the computer you're using, use the Windows Notepad.
3. Paste the information from the Clipboard into Notepad or your word processor.

Remember that you have to paste each selection before you can copy a new one or you'll lose it - the first selection is deleted by the second. As with other research materials, be sure to note the address (URL) of the site and the date and time you accessed it for your assignment's references section.

Beware of Plagiarism:

The above note-taking practice is like photocopying articles in a journal or chapters in a book to reproduce them and make them more portable. However, it's critical to remember that the information you've copied from the Web is not yours. Cutting and pasting information together from the Internet doesn't make it your paper. Plagiarizing like this is possible with books or journals as well, but the ease of cutting and pasting text in a word-processing document makes information from the Web very vulnerable to being misused. As with any other research paper, you must understand, condense, synthesize, and re-organize the information from all your sources into your own words. The Study Skills Tip Sheet "Plagiarism and Academic Integrity" contains more extensive information about plagiarism and the appropriate acknowledgement of sources.

Strategy 3: Locating specific information:

Scanning involves running your eyes down a page looking for specific facts or key words and phrases. The computer can do this for you. After you open the document

- Go to Edit and click on "Find in This Page."
- Type in the key words you are looking for and hit enter.

Strategy 4: Get more information:

The Counselling Department is the best source for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford - 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack - 604-795-2808 (E 105) to make an appointment. Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Learning from Lectures
Learning from Textbooks
Managing Nervousness During Oral
Presentations

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