Reading Critically

Selecting quality literature

Selecting quality literature can mean the difference between hours spent collecting useful data, and hours wasted sifting through irrelevant material. Our tips for selecting quality reading material are:

- Define your focus by understanding your topic's history, context and the various strands of the issue
- Become familiar with prominent scholars, hot topics and seminal studies in your field
- Follow the reference list at the end of a text to find related peer-reviewed literature
- Talk to academics, supervisors and practitioners
- Focus on academic, peer-reviewed literature
- Check current trends and debates in non-academic practitioner journals

The 3 Rs

The 3 Rs help guide your critical selection of the literature you read.

The 3 Rs are:
RECENCY: When was the literature written?
RELIABILITY: Who wrote it? (Status, institution, project); Where is it published? (journal, publisher)
RELEVANCE: Consider the title and abstract. How relevant is it to your research focus?

In some instances, literature that was published several years ago may be deemed out-dated and irrelevant. Other times, literature can remain relevant despite its older publication date, so either way it is important to consider a text's recency.

There will no doubt be certain journals and scholars with a strong presence and solid reputations in your field. Investigating the reliability and suitability of lesser known publishers and authors could go a long way in ensuring you select quality material to support your thesis.

Finally, if a text's title and abstract don't align with your research focus, you'll likely find that the content of the article doesn't either. Probably time to ditch that one!

Once you have selected your reading material, there are various reading strategies you can use to help get the most out of your reading time. Please see the *Reading Strategies for HDR Students* handout for these tips.

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Questions to guide critical Reading

What is the purpose of the text? Is the writer:

- Reporting results of empirical research? If so, is the aim clearly stated? Is the methodology clear? Are the conclusions logical? Do you agree with them? Does the author acknowledge the study's limitations?

- Giving a meta-review of recent research?

- Proposing a new model?

- Arguing a position about an issue?

- Doing something that is none of these?

Identify and evaluate the line of reasoning

- What is the overall idea the author wants me to accept & is the idea based off a strong premise?

- What are reasons presented to persuade me to accept this?

- Are all the reasons relevant to the overall argument and do they support the conclusion?

- Do the reasons follow logically from one another?

Question surface appearances

- What is the underlying worldview of the writer? Is its reasonable? Is there a hidden agenda?

- Is the evidence supporting the reasons valid? Is it biased?

- Has the evidence been manipulated? (e.g.: numbers as percentages seem more persuasive)

- Does the language attempt to persuade? (e.g.: 'clearly', 'surely', 'obviously')

- Are there obvious flaws or limitations in the research that the author has not addressed?

Academic Learning Support offer free individual consultations and group workshops for HDR students. For more writing, study, and academic support contact learningsupport@newcastle.edu.au or call 02 4921 5350.

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