

PGR Tips: Effective reading

Effective reading is vital to completing your doctorate, whatever your discipline. Below are some tips to make your reading more effective

PQRS method

Preview-initial reading to gain a general idea of content to select

Questions to identify the information you want to extract

Read the material, actively seeking answers

Summarise what you have read in notes

Preview and selection

You can't read everything; read thoroughly only when you are sure the information is relevant. Use skimming (as you would newspaper headlines) and scanning (as you would a phone book) to help you to choose what to read; Use skimming to

- preview a selection of text prior to detailed reading
- refresh your understanding of the text after detailed reading
- Use scanning for
 - introduction or preface
 - first or last paragraph of chapters
 - concluding or summarising chapter
 - book index

Critical questions

- What do you want to find out?
- What questions does the paper address?
- What are the main conclusions of the paper?
- Does the data actually support the conclusions? What is the quality? Are there any other possible interpretations or explanations?
- Why are the conclusions important?

Reading

Read, actively seeking the answers to the questions you have set. Experiment with increasing your reading speed to see if that is useful for you.

Summarise and keep notes

Note-making isn't just about having something to refer to later – it is part of the learning process itself

- Be clear *why* you are making notes (to select, understand or remember?)
 - Be selective – only include the information that is relevant to the current task
 - Use colour and space to organise your notes, adapt your note making style to the task
 - Experiment with different formats such as index cards or mind maps
 - Ensure that you keep good notes in a systematic way so that you can use them throughout your doctorate
- Talk to other researchers about what works for them and see what a difference effective reading can make.

Are you keen to use the skills you have gained during your doctorate in a prestigious, quantitative investment banking career? Careers in Focus: Investment Banking for PhDs on the 23rd September 2008, Glaziers Hall, London is your ideal opportunity to find out how to do it and what will be involved when you get there. This an interactive one day event is hosted by employers keen to recruit PhDs in quantitative subjects and with experience of computer modeling? For more information visit www.vitae.ac.uk/cif. Places are limited so apply now! Deadline: 3 September.

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PGR Tips on citation

Academic writing requires the careful presentation of evidence in support of an argument. Some of that evidence will be uncovered through your own research. However, much of it will be drawn from the other people's work. It is important that you represent it accurately and enable future scholars to verify the conclusions that you have drawn. This is where citation comes in. Citation is an academic skill which impacts on your research, your writing and your credibility as a scholar. More broadly it will help enhance your organisational skills.

Take advice/attend training

Talk to your supervisor and to a subject librarian about your citation practice. They may be able to make suggestions or introduce you to useful software or other shortcuts. Your institution will have a dedicated information librarian who works in your discipline. These people can be valuable allies for you so they are worth seeking out.

Record citations accurately

Make sure that you have a system to record all of the information you will need to include in citations. As citations systems require you to include slightly different information it is best to record all the available bibliographic information.

Use citation software

Citation software such as Endnote, RefWorks or Connotea will help you to accurately record, store and retrieve citations to use in your thesis and publications. (Word 2007 also has a bibliography feature.) It can save you time through uploading directly from citation databases and change the format of your references at the click of a button.

Recalling and retrieving references

As a doctorate takes place over several years it is easy to end up reading the same thing several times. Your system for storing and recalling references should enable you to find things that you cannot remember all of the details of. You may achieve this by adding key words, cross referencing notes or by regularly reviewing what you have read.

What to cite?

Think about why you are citing. Are you citing to support your argument by providing background, key facts or referring to a method, or engaging in a debate where you cite someone to disprove or disagree with them. Citation should show how your work fits into a broader academic debate so be careful to avoid bias and not to only cite people you agree with.

Don't rely on 'referral' citations from other sources; go back to the originals where possible. You don't always need to refer to the very earliest mention of the subject at hand although it is often thought good manners to do so. If the same information was established independently by different researchers ideally all should be cited.

How?

Before you start writing check which citation style you need to work in. There are variations between subjects, departments and different journals so make sure you know. There are also conventions for online citation.

Check citations very carefully as part of your proof reading.

Tips on giving presentations

Giving presentations is an important element of your doctorate and being able to speak in public is a really valuable transferable skill. But a lot of people do get nervous at the thought. Remember that nerves don't need to stop you from giving a great talk! Although everyone will react differently, we hope that these general tips may help you.

Prepare

Feeling well prepared will make you feel less stressed on the day. You will get to know where your preferred balance of preparation and spontaneity lies, but it may be better to err on the side of caution to begin with. Make sure your talk has a good story line and you have all the facts at your finger tips. Use crib cards if you need to. Have any slides on you in different formats, just to make sure IT compatibility issues don't spoil the day.

Structure

A good introduction is essential to enthuse people and convey why what you are doing is interesting. There are probably different ways to order your presentation so have a think which will work best. A strong summing up will help your audience remember.

Illustrate

If you use Powerpoint, don't show a shortened (or worse, verbatim) version of the text of your talk, but illustrate it. If you have an interesting analogy to illustrate your work this will help people remember your talk.

Practice

Practice may not make completely perfect, but it really is amazing how much better any presentation gets once it has been given a few times. Practice addressing the audience, rather than reciting a memorised lecture. Some eye contact with people listening will help engage them. Don't worry about becoming stale, it will mature like fine wine.

Time

Check your timing. It would be a shame to run out of time and be stopped mid flow. Nerves may make you speak faster (practice may help you to slow down).

Refine

Get feedback from your practice audience, check their reaction (and your own) and incorporate into the next version.....

Practice again, as often as you can. It is also a good idea to practice fielding questions.

More in depth information on this can be found on the Vitae website: www.vitae.ac.uk/pgprofile

PGR Tips on engaging the public in your research

You may have noticed your funder or your institution encouraging you to spend time talking to the general public about your research. Doing this can be very rewarding. We list the opportunities and potential benefits of public engagement on the Vitae website at www.vitae.ac.uk/1238/Public-engagement.html. These include:

- Honing your presentation skills
- Thinking about your project's place in the bigger picture
- Increasing the visibility of your subject
- Building your own profile
- Having some fun and realising how much of an expert you really are.

It also contains a short "how to" list, which is expanded on here:

Consider your audience

This is even more important than for a presentation to your peers. Consider the age, interests and prior knowledge of your audience. Don't assume that your audience is stupid but avoid jargon and specialised language.

What sort of activity?

Lots of ideas and organisations that run activities are listed on the Vitae website. But for example consider writing for a non-specialist magazine, talking to school children, taking part in science or other festivals, taking part in an exhibition or any other opportunities that arise or that you can create. Talking to family or friends that work in different areas is all good practice, and also an opportunity to also get different perspectives on what you are doing, which could be useful.

Consider the purpose of your activity

You may want to debunk some myths research and researchers. More usually your aim will be to engage your audience in the wider field of your research. In the time you will have available it may not be possible to touch on your specific contribution to that field- but does it matter? Focus on one key message at a time

Delivery

What props or visual aids could you use to enliven your presentation? (check health and safety requirements!). What illustrations would add to your article? Try and relate your topic to your audience's situation and interests and think about the possible application of your research.

Seek advice when you are dealing with the media

Most institutions will have an office that can advise on how to deal with publicity.

Most of all- have fun!

Have you had experience of presenting your research to the general public? If so please leave a comment on the PGR Tips part of the Vitae website explaining what you did. Have you got any tips to share?

PGR Tips: Using peer review effectively

Peer review is the process that ensures quality in academia; experts in your field comment on work submitted for publication or funding. The following tips mainly apply to publications but will also be applicable to grant applications. When you send a paper to a journal, the editor will send it to reviewers who will comment on your research and recommend changes or reject it for publication.

- **proofread your work thoroughly before submission** – a reviewer will only find it distracting if they are not able to concentrate on the content because there are spelling, grammatical or factual errors. Make sure your references are perfect and in the format the journal requests, and any reference to figures or tables is correct. Spend time on your figures, tables and their legends. Get someone else to read it and comment to get an outsider's perspective and so the referee won't be the first person apart from the authors to see it.
- **make it easy for the reviewer** – Format your work as it would appear as the finished article (for example in a PDF file if the journal allows submission as this). Seeing it in the journal format may make it easier for a reviewer to see how your article will sit in the journal. Make sure you reference the work of as many possible reviewers as possible.
- **don't take it personally** – The majority of reviewer comments will be negative and may be worded curtly because of time constraints on the reviewers. As you have spent a lot of time preparing your submission this may be hard to take! However, they are unlikely to be personal (if they are they are more likely aimed at your supervisor). Take time to understand the point of the comments and use the feedback. Take heart from any positive comments.
- **don't give up** – "no" from an editor doesn't always mean "no", it can mean "maybe", which in turn can then be made into a "yes". With your supervisor evaluate the potential for resubmission after editing. An editor will usually be open to arguments against comments if they are strong. In a letter to the editor address each comment and say which you will take on board (and thank the reviewer for their suggestions) and why you won't incorporate others. If resubmission is not possible you may have chosen too ambitious a journal or one in the wrong field. In this case rewrite the paper to the specifications of a different journal and resubmit there.
- **choose your critics** - often you will be given the opportunity to recommend reviewers or suggest who you would rather not review it. Use this as your supervisor will have a feel for the political landscape in the field.
- **become involved with peer reviewing the work of others**- if you want to become an academic peer review will be a substantial part of your job. Getting involved early will help you develop the skills you need. If any academics you know edit for a relevant journal, offer your services as a reviewer. Or your supervisor might delegate some of his/her reviewing to you.

For more information have a look at the Just for Postgrads section of the UK GRAD website; www.grad.ac.uk/jfp.