Reading and note-making

1. Active reading
Have a clear purpose in mind before you start your reading!

Be organised with your reading: this means developing an overview of your topic before looking at more detailed information. Start by reading any text books recommended in your module handbook or by your tutor to get an idea of the main issues before you research specific topics. It also means having a strategy to deal with difficult and complex readings.

Before you read ask yourself:

- **Why** am I reading this?
  - What question do I want this text to answer? Be clear in your mind about what you are trying to find out from this text as this will make it easier to understand the reading.

- **What** information can I get from this reading?
  - Check the text is up-to-date; look at the title, the contents list and in the index for your key words; look at chapter or sub-headings; look at any summary or concluding paragraphs.

- **How** will this reading help me complete my assignment?
  - Where does this text fit in my assignment plan? Will it contain information I need? Is it too complex or too simple? Is it on my reading list? Do I have time to read it?

While you read you may find that a useful reading is difficult to understand and even more difficult to summarise in your own words. Don’t just copy chunks of text: use **Active Reading Strategies** to develop your reading and note-making skills.

- Monitor your comprehension. ✓
  - After each short section of reading, look away from the text and try to recall in your own words what you have read. If you need to, re-read the text.

- Write key words or phrases. ✓
  - Look at the first and last sentences in paragraphs or in introductions/conclusions. Underline or record key points but be selective- you don't want to highlight everything.

- Question your reading. ✓
  - What is the main point/argument in this text? Why is it relevant? Do I agree/disagree with the author?

- Use pattern notes. ✓
  - summarise the article in a diagram to show how the main points or ideas relate to each other.
• Adjust your reading speed. ✓
  • Easy sections of text can be read quickly or even scanned while
difficult sections need to be read slowly. You may want to re-
read some sentences or even read aloud to clarify the meaning.

• Check the meaning of words. ✓
  • Use a dictionary or the glossary of terms within the reading (if
available) to check words you are not sure of. Certain words
have different meanings in different contexts or subject areas so
it is also important to use a subject specific dictionary to check
new words.

2. Writing clear notes
When you start writing your notes, don’t just record everything that you have
just read. Ask yourself:

• Do I need this information for my assignment? - Check your
  assignment plan.

• Have I found this information anywhere else? - This can be useful for
cross-referencing and for finding several sources to support your
argument.

• How can I use these notes in my assignment? - Does this information
fit in my assignment plan? Save time by not writing down information
that you don’t need.

Top 5 tips for writing clear notes:
1. Separate quotations from your own notes either by writing in a different
colour or in a different part of your note page.

2. Leave space around your notes so that you can easily add more
information later.

3. Write notes in your own words without copying whole paragraphs.

4. Organise your notes with
  • headings,
  • a numbering system,
  • colour coding (either the writing or a box around a section of
  notes),
  • diagrams and
  • lines or arrows to link related points.

5. Record the exact details of each and every source as you write your
notes.

Useful references
Macmillan, pp 116-125.