# Designing effective reading lists

Students' approaches to reading lists vary, depending on the type of lists they have previously encountered, how they have been expected to use these, their research skills and whether they have had practice reviewing and evaluating literature. Creating reading lists that are structured, focused and contextualised help students to plan and engage with reading. This resource introduces three questions to consider when designing reading lists.

Further guidance is available on creating [targeted reading lists to support disabled students](https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning-reasonable-adjustments#collapse1800576).

## How is the list structured?

Students will encounter numerous reading lists, each with its own structure and expectations for use. Once you've chosen a structure, make it clear to students why it is structured in this way and how you expect students to use it. A clear structure will enable students to prioritise reading and make appropriate use of resources. Here are three suggestions for ways to structure your list, which can be used on their own or together:

**• Highlight core and additional reading.** This is particularly important for lengthy reading lists. Highlighting particularly useful chapters or sections can help students to organise and focus their reading, which is key if students are expected to complete reading during short term-times.

**• Identify topics.** Some reading lists may cover a variety of topics, so consider grouping the list according to these. This will help students to prioritise what’s relevant for each particular question or area of study and pursue developing interests.

**• Timetable reading.** If you plan to focus on a particular text or topic each week or teaching session, consider making this explicit, for example, by using headings such as ‘Week 1 Reading’. This will mean that students know what is expected of them for each session and can plan the order in which they choose to read texts.

In addition to structuring your reading list, consider providing brief annotations for each of your recommended readings. This might include information about why you’ve included it and what the main focus of it is (this is not always obvious from the title alone). Having some contextual information such as this will help the student to be more effective in their reading. It gives students the ability to judge which resources are most appropriate for their topic or interests, highlights aspects to pay attention to in their reading, and reduces the burden of having to locate and skim-read numerous texts that may not be relevant.

## How accessible is the reading?

To ensure students can access the resources you plan to include in your list, try the following:

**• Check** [**SOLO**](http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/primo-explore/search?vid=SOLO&lang=en_US&sortby=rank)**.** It's a simple step, but searching the University's library listings to check whether copies of the text are available (either electronically or in libraries) is essential. If there’s only one copy of the book, if it is out of print, or if your students can’t access a resource because it isn’t available in their college or department library, consider whether it is essential. If it is, share key chapters or sections by scanning and creating pdf. This is essential if learning is taking place online and students can't access libraries.

• **Make your list available in advance.** It can take at least 6 weeks for students to receive texts in in alternative formats such as Braille, enlarged print, or audio recordings. Make your reading list available early to give students with specific learning requirements sufficient time to request copies that they can use.

**• Use** [**Oxford Reading Lists Online**](https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/oxford-reading-lists-online-orlo) **(ORLO).** ORLO provides direct links from the citation to the full electronic text, if available, or to the library catalogue listing, making texts more accessible for everyone. Those using text-to-speech software can have immediate access because it is in digital form. Direct access to electronic versions from the reading list greatly enhances accessibility for disabled people. The system enables reading lists to be structured, annotated and formatted. For more information about the availability of ORLO contact [ORLO@bodleian.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ORLO@bodleian.ox.ac.uk).

## Does the list reflect the full range of available resources?

**• Update lists.** If re-using an old reading list, check it is up-to-date and includes the most recent editions of texts. New texts or alternative resources may have been published since the reading list was first written, which may need adding.

**• Invite student feedback.** Have your students found a recommended resource or text especially helpful / unhelpful? Perhaps they have identified an alternative text which they found relevant and engaging. Inviting feedback from your students about how they used the reading list and engaged with the suggested texts will help you to develop a list that includes the most relevant and useful range of resources.

**• Diversify.** To suit different modes of teaching and learning, try to include a range of resources in different formats, such as books (paper and electronic versions), journal articles, websites, podcasts, and videos. In addition to diversifying your resources, check whether your list includes a range of perspectives and contributors or if it overlooks certain voices and debates. Reflect on the perspectives and voices you’re asking students to engage with and whether these are balanced.

## How does it support students’ research skills?

Some ideas are listed below to help you to support students to develop the skills to find and evaluate material independently, either beyond the reading list or when no reading list is provided. These will work best when explicitly introduced as standalone activities as students will more clearly see the aim and purpose of the exercise. 

**• Provide a starting point.** Provide students with a list of just a few key journals and invite them to find relevant peer-reviewed material on a specific topic. Doing this in a group, where students can compare results, will prompt discussion about the different techniques and search methods they used.

**• Build a list.** Asking students to work alone or in pairs to design their own reading list on a topic can give insights into the research and evaluation skills that students currently have and those they need to develop to further.

**• Provide resources to evaluate.** This can be done as a short in-class activity where you provide students with a handful of resources and give them a specified amount of time to select which ones are most relevant and appropriate for a particular topic / question. Getting students to feed back their decisions and the rationale about the resources they chose and those they discarded can provide an opportunity to brainstorm the different techniques that students can use to evaluate material - reading abstracts, searching for key words, identifying the source of publication - and so on. Alternatively, reverse the activity so that different students / pairings are each provided with a different aspect to focus on - e.g. reading abstracts - and use this to compare the different approaches and their results. 

**• Use a cover sheet.** An example of an ongoing activity is to ask students to fill in a cover sheet accompanying submitted work which invites them to reflect on which resources they used, why, how they identified them, how much of them they read, and whether they used them in the task. This will help students to reflect on their research and analysis skills - for example, they may waste time reading lots of material they never use in the assignment or they may get caught in a cycle of following endless footnotes and references. Identifying these areas will help you and the student to see where they need to develop - and how - and what they are already doing well.