Chapter 1. Introduction to Academic Writing

1.1 Post-Secondary Reading and Writing

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In a post-secondary environment, academic expectations change from what you may have experienced in high school. The quantity of work you are expected to do is increased. When instructors expect you to read pages upon pages or study hours and hours for one particular course, managing your workload can be challenging. This chapter includes strategies for studying efficiently and managing your time.

The quality of the work you do also changes. It is not enough to understand course material and summarize it on an exam. You will also be expected to seriously engage with new ideas by reflecting on them, analyzing them, critiquing them, making connections, drawing conclusions, or finding new ways of thinking about a given subject. Educationally, you are moving into deeper waters. A good introductory writing course will help you swim.

**Table 1.1: High School versus Post-Secondary Assignments** summarizes some of the other major differences between high school and university assignments.

**Table 1.1** High School versus Post-Secondary Assignments
Reading assignments are moderately long. Teachers may set aside some class time for reading and reviewing the material in depth.

Teachers often provide study guides and other aids to help you prepare for exams.

Your grade is determined by your performance on a wide variety of assessments, including minor and major assignments. Not all assessments are writing based.

Writing assignments include personal writing and creative writing in addition to expository writing.

The structure and format of writing assignments is generally stable over the high school years.

Teachers often go out of their way to identify and try to help students who are performing poorly on exams, missing classes, not turning in assignments, or just struggling with the course. Often teachers will give students many “second chances.”

Some reading assignments may be very long. You will be expected to come to class with a basic understanding of the material.

Reviewing for exams is primarily your responsibility.

Your grade may depend on just a few major assessments. Most assessments are writing based.

Outside of creative writing courses, most writing assignments are expository.

 Depending on the course, you may be asked to master new forms of writing and follow standards within a particular professional field.

Although teachers want their students to succeed, they may not always realize when students are struggling. They also expect you to be proactive and take steps to help yourself. “Second chances” are less common.

This chapter covers the types of reading and writing assignments you will encounter as a post-secondary student. You will also learn a variety of strategies for mastering these new challenges—and becoming a more confident student and writer.

Throughout this chapter, you will follow a first-year student named Crystal. After several years of working as a saleswoman in a department store, Crystal has decided to pursue a degree in elementary education and become a teacher. She is continuing to work part time, and occasionally she finds it challenging to balance the demands of work, school, and caring for her four-year-old son. As you read about Crystal, think about how you can use her experience to get the most out of your own experience.

Setting Goals

By planning carefully and following through on her daily and weekly goals, Crystal was able to fulfill one of her goals for the semester. Although her exam scores were not as high as she had hoped, her consistently strong performance on writing assignments tipped her grade from a B+ to an A−. She was pleased to have earned a high grade in one of the required courses for her major. She was also glad to have gotten the most out of an introductory course that would help her become an effective teacher.

How does Crystal’s experience relate to your own post-secondary educational experience?

To do well in the post-secondary environment, it is important to stay focused on how your day-to-day actions determine your long-term success. You may not have defined your career goals or chosen a major yet. Even so, you surely have some overarching goals for what you want out of your studies to expand your career options, to increase your earning power, or just to learn something new. In time, you will define your long-term goals more explicitly. Doing solid, steady work, day by day and week by week, will help you meet those goals.
Discussion 1

With your group, discuss the following issues and questions:

Introduce yourself: Who are you? Why are you taking the course? Where are you living now?

- How do you feel about writing in general? (You will not be judged on this.)
- Identify one long-term goal you would like to have achieved by the time you complete your diploma or degree. For instance, you might want a particular job in your field.
- Identify one semester goal that will help you fulfill the long-term goal you just set.
- Review Table 1.1, High School versus Post-Secondary Assignments and answer the following questions:
  - In what ways do you think post-secondary education will be rewarding for you as a learner?
  - What aspects of post-secondary education do you expect to find most challenging?
  - What changes do you think you might have to make in your life to ensure your success in a post-secondary learning environment?

Reading Strategies

Your post-secondary courses will sharpen both your reading and your writing skills. Most of your writing assignments—from brief response papers to in-depth research projects—will depend on your understanding of course reading assignments or related readings you do on your own. And it is difficult, if not impossible, to write effectively about a text that you have not understood. Even when you do understand the reading, it can be hard to write about it if you do not feel personally engaged with the ideas discussed.

This section discusses strategies you can use to get the most out of your reading assignments. These strategies fall into three broad categories:

- Planning strategies to help you manage your reading assignments
- Comprehension strategies to help you understand the material
- Active reading strategies to take your understanding to a higher and deeper level

Planning Your Reading

Have you ever stayed up all night cramming just before an exam? Or found yourself skimming a detailed memo from your boss five minutes before a crucial meeting? The first step in handling your reading successfully is planning. This involves both managing your time and setting a clear purpose for your reading.

Managing Your Reading Time

You will learn more detailed strategies for time management in Section 1.2: Developing Study Skills, but for now, focus on setting aside enough time for reading and breaking your assignments into manageable chunks. For example, if you are assigned a 70-page chapter to read for next week’s class, try not to wait until the night before to get started. Give yourself at least a few days and tackle one section at a time.
Your method for breaking up the assignment will depend on the type of reading. If the text is very dense and packed with unfamiliar terms and concepts, you may need to read no more than 5 or 10 pages in one sitting so that you can truly understand and process the information. With more user-friendly texts, you will be able to handle longer sections—20 to 40 pages, for instance. And if you have a highly engaging reading assignment, such as a novel you cannot put down, you may be able to read lengthy passages in one sitting.

As the semester progresses, you will develop a better sense of how much time you need to allow for the reading assignments in different subjects. It also makes sense to preview each assignment well in advance to assess its difficulty level and to determine how much reading time to set aside.

**Tip**

Instructors at the post-secondary level often set aside reserve readings for a particular course. These consist of articles, book chapters, or other texts that are not part of the primary course textbook. Copies of reserve readings are available through the university library, in print, or more often, online. When you are assigned a reserve reading, download it ahead of time (and let your instructor know if you have trouble accessing it). Skim through it to get a rough idea of how much time you will need to read the assignment in full.

**Setting a Purpose**

The other key component of planning is setting a purpose. Knowing what you want to get out of a reading assignment helps you determine how to approach it and how much time to spend on it. It also helps you stay focused during those occasional moments when it is late, you are tired, and when relaxing in front of the television sounds far more appealing than curling up with a stack of journal articles.

Sometimes your purpose is simple. You might just need to understand the reading material well enough to discuss it intelligently in class the next day. However, your purpose will often go beyond that. For instance, you might also read to compare two texts, to formulate a personal response to a text, or to gather ideas for future research. Here are some questions to ask to help determine your purpose:

How did my instructor frame the assignment? Often instructors will tell you what they expect you to get out of the reading. For example:

Read Chapter 2 and come to class prepared to discuss current theories related to conducting risk assessments.

Read these two articles and compare Smith’s and Jones’s perspectives on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982).

Read Chapter 5 and think about how you could apply these guidelines to the first stages of onsite patient assessment.

How deeply do I need to understand the reading? If you are majoring in emergency management and you are assigned to read Chapter 1, “Introduction to Emergency Management,” it is safe to assume the chapter presents fundamental concepts that you will be expected to master. However, for some reading assignments, you may be expected to form a general understanding but not necessarily master the content. Again, pay attention to how your instructor presents the assignment.
How does this assignment relate to other course readings or to concepts discussed in class? Your instructor may make some of these connections explicitly, but if not, try to draw connections on your own. (Needless to say, it helps to take detailed notes both when in class and when you read.)

How might I use this text again in the future? If you are assigned to read about a topic that has always interested you, your reading assignment might help you develop ideas for a future research paper. Some reading assignments provide valuable tips or summaries worth bookmarking for future reference. Think about what you can take from the reading that will stay with you.

**Improving Your Comprehension**

You have blocked out time for your reading assignments and set a purpose for reading. Now comes the challenge: making sure you actually understand all the information you are expected to process. Some of your reading assignments will be fairly straightforward. Others, however, will be longer or more complex, so you will need a plan for how to handle them.

For any expository writing—that is, nonfiction, informational writing—you first comprehension goal is to identify the main points and relate any details to those main points. Because post-secondary-level texts can be challenging, you will also need to monitor your reading comprehension. That is, you will need to stop periodically and assess how well you understand what you are reading. Finally, you can improve comprehension by taking time to determine which strategies work best for you and putting those strategies into practice.

**Identifying the Main Points**

In your courses, you will be reading a wide variety of materials, including the following:

- Textbooks. These usually include summaries, glossaries, comprehension questions, and other study aids.
- Nonfiction trade books. These are less likely to include the study features found in textbooks.
- Popular magazines, newspapers, or web articles. These are usually written for a general audience.
- Scholarly books and journal articles. These are written for an audience of specialists in a given field.

Regardless of what type of expository text you are assigned to read, your primary comprehension goal is to identify the main point: the most important idea that the writer wants to communicate and often states early on. Finding the main point gives you a framework to organize the details presented in the reading and relate the reading to concepts you have learned in class or through other reading assignments. After identifying the main point, you will find the supporting points, details, facts, and explanations that develop and clarify the main point.

Some texts make that task relatively easy. Textbooks, for instance, include the aforementioned features as well as headings and subheadings intended to make it easier for students to identify core concepts. Graphic features such as sidebars, diagrams, and charts help students understand complex information and distinguish between essential and inessential points. When you are assigned to read from a textbook, be sure to use available comprehension aids to help you identify the main points.
Trade books and popular articles may not be written specifically for an educational purpose; nevertheless, they also include features that can help you identify the main ideas.

Trade books. Many trade books include an introduction that presents the writer’s main ideas and purpose for writing. Reading chapter titles (and any subtitles within the chapter) will help you get a broad sense of what is covered. It also helps to read the beginning and ending paragraphs of a chapter closely. These paragraphs often sum up the main ideas presented.

Popular articles. Reading the headings and introductory paragraphs carefully is crucial. In magazine articles, these features (along with the closing paragraphs) present the main concepts. Hard news articles in newspapers present the gist of the news story in the lead paragraph, while subsequent paragraphs present increasingly general details.

At the far end of the reading difficulty scale are scholarly books and journal articles. Because these texts are aimed at a specialized, highly educated audience, the authors presume their readers are already familiar with the topic. The language and writing style is sophisticated and sometimes dense.

When you read scholarly books and journal articles, try to apply the same strategies discussed earlier for other types of text. The introduction usually presents the writer’s thesis—the idea or hypothesis the writer is trying to prove. Headings and subheadings can help you understand how the writer has organized support for the thesis. Additionally, academic journal articles often include a summary at the beginning, called an abstract, and electronic databases include summaries of articles too.

**Monitoring Your Comprehension**

Finding the main idea and paying attention to text features as you read helps you figure out what you should know. Just as important, however, is being able to figure out what you do not know and developing a strategy to deal with it.

Textbooks often include comprehension questions in the margins or at the end of a section or chapter. As you read, stop occasionally to answer these questions on paper or in your head. Use them to identify sections you may need to reread, read more carefully, or ask your instructor about later.

Even when a text does not have built-in comprehension features, you can actively monitor your own comprehension. Try these strategies, adapting them as needed to suit different kinds of texts:

Summarize. At the end of each section, pause to summarize the main points in a few sentences. If you have trouble doing so, revisit that section. (You will learn more about this in Chapter 3: *Putting Ideas into Your Own Words and Paragraphs*.)

Ask and answer questions. When you begin reading a section, try to identify two to three questions you should be able to answer after you finish it. Write down your questions and use them to test yourself on the reading. If you cannot answer a question, try to determine why. Is the answer buried in that section of reading but just not coming across to you? Or do you expect to find the answer in another part of the reading?

Do not read in a vacuum. Look for opportunities to discuss the reading with your classmates. Many instructors set
up online discussion forums or blogs specifically for that purpose. Participating in these discussions can help you determine whether your understanding of the main points is the same as your peers’.

These discussions can also serve as a reality check. If everyone in the class struggled with the reading, it may be exceptionally challenging. If it was easy for everyone but you, you may need to see your instructor for help.

As a working mother, Crystal found that the best time to get her reading done was in the evening, after she had put her four-year-old to bed. However, she occasionally had trouble concentrating at the end of a long day. She found that by actively working to summarize the reading and asking and answering questions, she focused better and retained more of what she read. She also found that evenings were a good time to check the class discussion forums that a few of her instructors had created.

**Self-Practice Exercise 1.1**

Choose any text that you have been assigned to read for one of your courses. In your notes, complete the following tasks:
- Summarize the main points of the text in two to three sentences.
- Write down two to three questions about the text that you can bring up during class discussion.

**Tip**

Students are often reluctant to seek help. They feel like doing so marks them as slow, weak, or demanding. The truth is, every learner occasionally struggles. If you are sincerely trying to keep up with the course reading but feel like you are in over your head, seek help. Speak up in class, schedule a meeting with your instructor, or visit your university learning centre for assistance.

Deal with the problem as early in the semester as you can. Instructors respect students who are proactive about their own learning. Most instructors will work hard to help students who make the effort to help themselves.

**Taking It to the Next Level: Active Reading**

Now that you have acquainted (or reacquainted) yourself with useful planning and comprehension strategies, your reading assignments may feel more manageable. You know what you need to do to get your reading done and make sure you grasp the main points. However, the most successful students in are not only competent readers but active, engaged readers.

There are two common strategies for active reading:

- Applying the four reading stages
- SQ3R
Both will help you look at a text in depth and help prepare you for when you have to study to use the information on an exam. You should try them both and decide which works better for you.

**Four Reading Stages**

Everyone reads and retains (or not) information in different ways. However, applying the following four stages of reading whenever you pick up material will not only help you understand what you are reading, but will also increase the chances of your actually remembering what you have read. While it may seem that this strategy of four reading stages takes a lot of time, it will become more natural for you as you continue applying it. Also, using these four stages will actually save you time because you will already have retained a lot, if not all, of the content, so when it is time to study for your exam, you will find that you already know the material.

Effective academic reading and study seeks not only to gain an understanding of the facts, opinions, and beliefs presented in a text, but also of the biases, assumptions, and perspectives underlying the discussion. The aim is to analyze, interpret, and evaluate the text, and then to draw logical inferences and conclusions.

The four reading strategies you will need to sharpen in order to get through your material are:

- Survey reading
- Close reading
- Inquiry reading
- Critical reading

These four strategies all stress “reading as thinking.” You will need to read actively to comprehend and remember what you are reading, for both your own and your instructor’s purposes. In order to do that, you need to think about the relevance of ideas to one another and about their usefulness to you personally, professionally, and academically.

Again, this differs from our usual daily reading activities, where interest often determines what we choose to read rather than utility. What happens when we are really not interested in what we are reading or seeing? Our eyes move down the page and our minds are elsewhere. We may read anywhere from one paragraph to several pages and suddenly realize we do not have the foggiest idea what we have just read. Clearly focusing our reading purpose on surveying, reading closely, being inquisitive, and reading critically, means we are reading for specific results: we read faster, know what we want, and read to get it.

**Survey reading**

Surveying quickly (2 to 10 minutes if it is a long chapter) allows you to see the overall picture or gist of what the text is sharing with you. Some of the benefits of surveying are listed below:

- It increases reading rate and attention because you have a road map: a mental picture of the beginning, middle, and end of this journey.
- It helps you create a mental map, allowing you to organize your travel by highlighting key topics and getting impressions of relevance, which in turn helps in the business or remembering.
• It aids in budgeting study time because you know the length and difficulty of the material. Usually you read study material to find out what is there in order to go back later and learn it. With surveying you accomplish the same in one-tenth the time.

• It **improves concentration** because you know what is ahead and how what you are reading fits into the total picture.

**Technique for survey reading**

For a text or chapter, look at introductions, summaries, chapter headings, bold print, and graphics to piece together the main theme and its development.

**Practical uses**

Magazines, journals, books, chapters, sections of dense material, anything that allows for an overview.

**Close reading**

Close reading allows you to concentrate and make decisions now about what is relevant and what is not. Its main purpose is to help ensure that you understand what you are reading and to help you store information in a logical and organized way, so when you need to recall the information, it is easier for you to do so. It is a necessary and critical strategy for academic reading for the following reasons:

• You read as if you were going to be tested on it immediately upon completion. You read to remember at least 75 to 80 percent of the information.

• You clearly identify main concepts, key details, and their relationships with one another. Close reading allows you to summarize effectively what you read.

• Your ability to answer essay questions improves because the concepts are more organized and understood rather than merely memorized.

• You become more confident because your understanding improves which, in turn, increases your enjoyment.

**Technique for close reading**

Survey for overall structure; read, annotating main theme, key points, and essential detail; summarize the important ideas and their development.

**Practical uses**

Any reading that requires 80 percent comprehension and retention of main points and supporting detail.

**Inquiry reading**

Inquiry reading tends to be what we do with material we are naturally interested in. We usually do not notice we
are doing this because we enjoy learning and thinking about it. Discovery reading is another term that describes this type of reading. Some of its benefits to the study process include:

**Increased focus:** By asking interpretative questions, determining relevance, and searching for your answers, you are involved and less likely to be bored or distracted.

**Retention:** Memory of the material is improved because of increased involvement.

**Stimulation of creativity:** This involvement will raise new questions for you and inspire further research.

**Matching instructor expectations:** Instructors are usually seeking deeper understanding as well as basic memory of concepts.

**Technique for inquiry reading**

Increase the volume and depth in questions while reading informational, interpretative, analytical, synthesizing, and evaluating kinds of questions.

**Practical uses**

Any material that requires both thorough comprehension and needs or inspires examination

**Critical reading**

Critical reading is necessary in order to determine the salience (or key points) of the concepts presented, their relevance, and the accuracy of arguments. When you read critically, you become even more deeply involved with the material, which will allow you to make better judgments about what is the more important information.

People often read reactively to material—especially debate, controversy, and politics. When readers react, they bring a wealth of personal experience and opinion to the concept to which they are reacting. But critical reading requires thinking—as you would expect—critically about the material. Critical thinking relies on reason, evidence, and open mindedness and recognizes the biases, assumptions, and motives of both the writer and the reader.

Learning to read critically offers these advantages:

- By substantiating arguments and interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating those supporting the concept moves mere reaction into critical reading and deepens your understanding.
- By analyzing relationships between the material read and other readings or experience, you can make connections.
- By making connections, you will increase your concentration and confidence in being able to discuss and evaluate what you read.

**Technique for critical reading**

Understand and analyze the material in terms of writer’s purpose and results, relevance to readers, and value to the field at large.
Practical uses

Any material that requires evaluation.

Your memory of facts and concepts will be enhanced by surveying and close reading. Interpretation, relevance, application, and evaluation of presented facts and concepts require deeper questioning and involvement. Inquiry and critical reading are more applicable at these stages. We will be discussing this in the next section: SQ3R.

Using the SQ3R Strategy

Another strategy you can use to become a more active, engaged reader is SQ3R, which is a step-by-step process to follow before, during, and after reading. You could use SQ3R for a variety of reading purposes:

- Getting main concepts only
- Flushing out key details
- Organizing concepts
- Writing a coherent summary of significant points and their development

This is not a new or unfamiliar process; SQ3R is only a new name. It describes surveying various resources (e.g., papers, journals, other relevant sources) for whatever project we are working on; generating questions to shape our understanding of the topic; reading the material; marking, reciting, or, in some way, logging what is critical to our task; and reviewing on what we have read.

You may already use some variation of SQ3R. In essence, the process works like this:

- Survey the text in advance.
- Form questions before you start reading.
- Read the text.
- Recite and/or record important points during and after reading.
- Review and reflect on the text after you read.

Each of these elements is discussed below.

Survey

Before you read, first survey or preview the text. As noted earlier, reading introductory paragraphs and headings can help you begin to figure out the author’s main point and identify what important topics will be covered. However, surveying does not stop there. Flip through the text and look for any pictures, charts or graphs, the table of contents, index, and glossary. Scan the preface and introduction to each chapter. Skim a few paragraphs. Preview any boldfaced or italicized vocabulary terms. This will help you form a first impression of the material and determine the appropriateness of the material.

The final stage of surveying occurs once you have identified which chapters are relevant. Quickly look at any headings as well as the introduction and conclusion to the chapter to confirm the relevance of the information.
Sometimes, this survey step alone may be enough because you may need only a general familiarization with the material. This is also when you will discover whether or not you want to look at the book more deeply.

**Question**

If you keep the question of why you are reading the material in mind, it will help you focus because you will be actively engaged in the information you are consuming. Also, if there are any visual aids, you will want to examine what they are showing as they probably represent important ideas.

Next, start brainstorming questions about the text. What do you expect to learn from the reading? You may find that some questions come to mind immediately based on your initial survey or based on previous readings and class discussions. If not, try using headings and subheadings in the text to formulate questions. For instance, if one heading in your textbook is **Conditional Sentence** and another is **Conditional Release**, you might ask yourself these questions:

- What are the major differences between these two concepts?
- Where does each appear in the sentencing process?

Although some of your questions may be simple factual questions, try to come up with a few that are more open ended. Asking in-depth questions will help you stay more engaged as you read. Once you have your questions in mind, you can move to the next step of actively reading to see if you can come up with an answer.

**Read**

*The next step is simple: read.* As you read, notice whether your first impressions of the text were correct. Are the author’s main points and overall approach about the same as what you predicted—or does the text contain a few surprises? Also, look for answers to your earlier questions and begin forming new ones. Continue to revise your impressions and questions as you read.

**Recite**

While you are reading, pause occasionally to recite or record important points. It is best to do this at the end of each section or when there is an obvious shift in the writer’s train of thought. Put the book aside for a moment and recite aloud the main points of the section or any important answers you found there. You might also record ideas by jotting down a few brief notes in addition to, or instead of, reciting aloud. Either way, the physical act of articulating information makes you more likely to remember it.

After you have finished reading, set the book aside and briefly answer your initial question by making notes or highlighting/underlining. Try to use your own words as much as possible, but if you find an important quote, you can identify it as well. If there are any diagrams, makes notes from memory on what information they are giving. Then look back at the diagrams to make sure you were accurate.

Repeat this questioning, reading, and reciting process for the rest of the chapter. As you work your way through, occasionally pause and really think about what you have read; it is easy to work through a section or chapter and realize that you have not actually absorbed any of the material.
Review and reflect

Once you have looked at the whole chapter, try to put each section into the context of the bigger picture. Ask yourself if you have really answered each question you set out with and if you have been accurate in your answers. To make sure that you really remember the information, review your notes again after about one week and then again three or four weeks later. Also, if the textbook includes review questions or your instructor has provided a study guide, use these tools to guide your review. You will want to record information in a more detailed format than you used during reading, such as in an outline or a list.

As you review the material, reflect on what you learned. Did anything surprise you, upset you, or make you think? Did you find yourself strongly agreeing or disagreeing with any points in the text? What topics would you like to explore further? Jot down your reflections in your notes. (Instructors sometimes require students to write brief response papers or maintain a reading journal. Use these assignments to help you reflect on what you read.)

Tip

As you go through your future readings, practise this method considering these points:

From memory, jot down the key ideas discussed in the section you just read. If you need it, use a separate piece of paper. Look back through the text and check your memory with what you jotted down. How did you do?

Choose one section from the chapter and write a summary from memory of what you learned from that section.

Now review that section. Identity what corresponds and what you omitted. How are you doing? When you read that section, did you consciously intend to remember it?

Although this process may seem time-consuming, you will find that it will actually save time. Because you have a question in mind while reading, you have more of a purpose while looking for the important information. The notes you take will also be more organized and concise because you are focused, and this will save you time when it comes to writing essays. Also, since you have reviewed throughout the process, you will not need to spend as much time reviewing for exams because it is already stored in your memory.

Self-practice exercise 1.2

Choose another text that you have been assigned to read for a class. Use the SQ3R process to complete the reading. (Keep in mind that you may need to spread the reading over more than one session, especially if the text is long.)

Be sure to complete all the steps involved. Then, reflect on how helpful you found this process. On a scale of 1 to 10, how useful did you find it? How does it compare with other study techniques you have used?

Using Other Active Reading Strategies

The SQ3R process encompasses a number of valuable active reading strategies: previewing a text, making predic-
tions, asking and answering questions, and summarizing. You can use the following additional strategies to further deepen your understanding of what you read.

- Connect what you read to what you already know. Look for ways the reading supports, extends, or challenges concepts you have learned elsewhere.
- Relate the reading to your own life. What statements, people, or situations relate to your personal experiences?
- Visualize. For both fiction and nonfiction texts, try to picture what is described. Visualizing is especially helpful when you are reading a narrative text, such as a novel or a historical account, or when you read expository text that describes a process, such as how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).
- Pay attention to graphics as well as text. Photographs, diagrams, flow charts, tables, and other graphics can help make abstract ideas more concrete and understandable.
- Understand the text in context. Understanding context means thinking about who wrote the text, when and where it was written, the author’s purpose for writing it, and what assumptions or agendas influenced the author’s ideas. For instance, two writers might both address the subject of health care reform, but if one article is an opinion piece and one is a news story, the context is different.
- Plan to talk or write about what you read. Jot down a few questions or comments in your notebook so you can bring them up in class. (This also gives you a source of topic ideas for papers and presentations later in the semester.) Discuss the reading on a class discussion board or blog about it.

As Crystal began her first semester of elementary education courses, she occasionally felt lost in a sea of new terms and theories about teaching and child development. She found that it helped to relate the reading to her personal observations of her son and other kids she knew.

**Writing at Work**

Many courses require students to participate in interactive online components, such as a discussion forum, a page on a social networking site, or a class blog. These tools are a great way to reinforce learning. Do not be afraid to be the student who starts the discussion.

Remember that when you interact with other students and teachers online, you need to project a mature, professional image. You may be able to use an informal, conversational tone, but complaining about the workload, using off-colour language, or “flaming” other participants is inappropriate.

Active reading can benefit you in ways that go beyond just earning good grades. By practising these strategies, you will find yourself more interested in your courses and better able to relate your academic work to the rest of your life. Being an interested, engaged student also helps you form lasting connections with your instructors and with other students that can be personally and professionally valuable. In short, it helps you get the most out of your education.

**Common Writing Assignments**

Writing assignments at the post-secondary level serve a different purpose than the typical writing assignments you completed in high school. In high school, teachers generally focus on teaching you to write in a variety of modes
and formats, including personal writing, expository writing, research papers, creative writing, and writing short answers and essays for exams. Over time, these assignments help you build a foundation of writing skills.

Now, however, your instructors will expect you to already have that foundation. Your composition courses will focus on writing for its own sake, helping you make the transition to higher-level writing assignments. However, in most of your other courses, writing assignments serve a different purpose. In those courses, you may use writing as one tool among many for learning how to think about a particular academic discipline.

Additionally, certain assignments teach you how to meet the expectations for professional writing in a given field. Depending on the class, you might be asked to write a lab report, a case study, a literary analysis, a business plan, or an account of a personal interview. You will need to learn and follow the standard conventions for those types of written products.

Finally, personal and creative writing assignments are less common at the post-secondary level than in high school. College and university courses emphasize expository writing—writing that explains or informs. Often expository writing assignments will incorporate outside research, too. Some classes will also require persuasive writing assignments in which you state and support your position on an issue. Your instructors will hold you to a higher standard when it comes to supporting your ideas with reasons and evidence.

**Table 1.2: Common Types of Writing Assignments** lists some of the most common types assignments you will encounter at the post-secondary level. It includes minor, less formal assignments as well as major ones. Which specific assignments you will be given will depend on the courses you take and the learning objectives developed by your instructors.

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**Table 1.2** Common Types of Writing Assignments
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal response paper</td>
<td>Expresses and explains your response to a reading assignment, a provocative quote, or a specific issue; may be very brief (sometimes a page or less) or more in depth</td>
<td>For a labour management course, students watch and write about videos of ineffective management/staff interactions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Restates the main points of a longer passage objectively and in your own words</td>
<td>For a psychology course, students write a one-page summary of an article about a man suffering from short-term memory loss.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persuasive/position paper</td>
<td>States and defends your position on an issue (often a controversial issue)</td>
<td>For a criminal justice course, students state their positions on capital punishment using research to support their argument.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-solution paper</td>
<td>Presents a problem, explains its causes, and proposes and explains a solution</td>
<td>For an emergency management course, a student presents a plan for implementing a crisis communications strategy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critique/literary analysis</td>
<td>States a thesis about a particular literary work and develops the thesis with evidence from the work and, sometimes, from additional sources</td>
<td>For a literature course, a student analyzes a short story by Ian Rankin and how it relates to the field of criminology OR compares multiple works by analyzing commonalities and differences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research/literature review</td>
<td>Sums up available research findings on a particular topic</td>
<td>For a course in criminology, a student reviews the past 20 years of research on whether violence in television and movies is correlated with violent behaviour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case study or case analysis</td>
<td>Investigates a particular person, group, or event in depth for the purpose of drawing a larger conclusion from the analysis</td>
<td>For a health science course, a student writes a case study demonstrating the successful treatment of a patient experiencing congestive heart failure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laboratory report</td>
<td>Presents a laboratory experiment, including the hypothesis, methods of data collection, results, and conclusions</td>
<td>For a psychology course, a group of students presents the results of an experiment in which they explored whether sleep deprivation produced memory deficits in lab rats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research journal</td>
<td>Records a student’s ideas and findings during the course of a long-term research project</td>
<td>For a capstone project, a student maintains a journal throughout a semester-long research project within the local fire department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>Presents a thesis and supports it with original research and/or other researchers’ findings on the topic; can take several different formats depending on the subject area</td>
<td>For a criminology course, a student chooses a topic/thesis on de-escalation techniques and conducts background research on existing evidence then creates his or her own research tool to measure the effectiveness of such techniques.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You might need to contact administrators with questions about your tuition or financial aid. Later, you might ask instructors to write recommendations on your behalf.

Treat these documents as professional communications. Address the recipient politely; state your question, problem, or request clearly; and use a formal, respectful tone. Doing so helps you make a positive impression and get a quicker response.

**Key Takeaways**

Post-secondary-level reading and writing assignments differ from high school assignments, not only in quantity but also in quality.

Managing reading assignments successfully requires you to plan and manage your time, set a purpose for reading, practise effective comprehension strategies, and use active reading strategies to deepen your understanding of the text.

Post-secondary writing assignments place greater emphasis on learning to think critically about a particular discipline and less emphasis on personal and creative writing.