

READING FOR STUDY



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1. Introduction

How can this booklet help you achieve your CIPFA qualification?

During your life so far, you will probably have acquired a wide range of general or basic skills that can be applied to different situations in your professional, academic and personal life. One of these skills is the ability to read.

During your studies, you will have to use your reading skills effectively in order to progress. You may think this is simple, having learnt to read much earlier in your life. However, you would be wrong. Reading is a skill that should be continuously developed. Indeed, some advanced reading techniques are very difficult to master.

Throughout your life, you will probably read a very wide range of different types of material. The purpose and focus of your reading will dictate the *type* of reading you engage in.

This booklet takes a closer look at *reading for study*. In the pages that follow, there will be advice about how to plan the reading that you do, to use your time effectively. A substantial amount of the text is devoted to a closer study of the techniques that can be employed whilst reading. This includes how to take effective notes from your reading and how to read more quickly. There is also advice about how to read difficult or intensive material and how to read critically.

Even if you have come across these areas in your academic studies so far, your reading skills will continue to improve if you practice them. Effective reading has numerous benefits. Your level of retention and comprehension of material will improve; your enjoyment of reading will be enhanced and your writing skills should also become more effective.

What types of reading can you expect to undertake whilst studying for your qualification?

As you will be aware, the CIPFA qualification is examination based. These examinations are scheduled for certain times of the year. In order to be successful in your examinations, you will need to have engaged with the open learning materials and undertaken additional reading from other sources. At the

end of each study session in the open learning materials is a list of suggested further reading. Depending on the subject, the focus of this reading may be in text books, numerous academic journals or articles in the press or *Public Finance*, or *Public money and management*.

In order to be successful, it will be necessary for you to read widely and reflect upon what you have read. As you progress through the CIPFA qualification, the ability to read critically becomes crucial. For example, in the final level of professional competence, the *Strategic Business Management paper* presents candidates with pre-seen reading material that is to be critically reviewed and forms the basis of the written examination.

2. How to plan your reading to your best advantage

Different types of reading.

How we read and the types of skills that are engaged, is dependent on the focus and the purpose of what we read. These can be summarised as follows:

- **Reading for pleasure** – You don't need much instruction as to how to go about this. If this was an activity that people did not find enjoyable, then people would not do it! Whatever the content of the books that you read, you are still practising your reading skills and extending your grammar, punctuation and spelling skills. It is a very good way of relaxing and relieving stress, so don't give it up when you start to study. After all, who wants to read about linear programming just before they go to sleep!
- **Previewing or skimming** – When we read a magazine or a newspaper we skim read. We tend to look at the headlines or the titles of the articles first or maybe read the first line of particular articles. We then select what we read based on our initial interest. This is a skill that is particularly valuable. When you study, it will not be possible for you to read everything related to a particular subject in the time you have available. You must therefore be selective. You can do this by skimming before you read. Another way to skim is to read the back covers of texts or examine the list of contents, introduction, chapter headings or the index. Try to focus on key words and ignore words that can be classed as 'fillers'. You can normally ascertain most of the meaning of a sentence or a paragraph by comprehending just a few such key words. Do not read about what you already know. As you read more and more information, the amount of knowledge that you already have will gradually increase, so your ability to skip some parts of the text will increase also. If you come across information that you think looks confusing or difficult, make a note to come back to it later. It may be the case that once you have read on in the text, the previous information becomes clearer to you.

- **Reading for mastery**
When you read to master something, you can expect it to take a lot longer. Your aim is to understand, evaluate and retain the information that you read. When you study, most of your reading will have these objectives.
- **Reading and questioning**
When you read you should ask yourself questions. These may include; what is this text about? What prior knowledge do I have about this subject? What is new about what I am reading? How does it fit in to the rest of the work I am doing? This is reading critically. More techniques for reading critically are discussed in section 4.
- **Making notes**
Making notes will help you remember what you have read. Sometimes it makes sense to make notes as you read, but this can hinder your overall flow of the text and much of the time it is more effective to read the text first before you start to make notes. This also helps you recall the information that you have read.
- **Orientation versus project reading**
Orientation reading is done to obtain a general idea relating to a particular concept. It is a useful technique that can be used to build vocabulary and acquiring and understanding basic concepts. There is no feedback loop associated with orientation reading. If you are not careful, you can spend too much time in orientation mode. You must try to put a time limit on your orientation reading, as there is generally more reading material available than time to do it!

If you are reading to solve a particular problem, this is called project reading. This is the type of reading that you are more likely to undertake as part of your CIPFA studies. Once you have acquired the sufficient information for the problem or project you are focused on, you will generally stop reading and go on to the next one.

Objectives of academic reading.

When you engage in academic reading, you generally do so to achieve one or more of the following objectives:

- To understand a theoretical concept
- To enhance your understanding
- To expand your applied knowledge of a subject
- To find out about possible alternative viewpoints in order to consolidate your own views

Preparing to read.

Preparing to read is essential in order for you to get the most out of your reading. You need to get organised. Establish a good environment. Try to read in surroundings that will help you concentrate, allow you to keep good posture and adopt a ready to work attitude. In order for you to maximise the rewards from your reading, you need to activate your brain prior to getting started. Some of the strategies that can be used in order to do this (some involve other people) are listed below:

- **Brainstorming** - You can do this alone or with others. Examine the title of the text you are about to read and list all of the information that comes into your mind. Use these pieces of information to recall and understand the material and reframe or reorder what you already know. Make notes of the things you may disagree with, or pinpoint areas that may need further research.
- **Group discussions** – You need other people to engage in this strategy. Other people can bring different perspectives, experience and knowledge, that you don't possess. Cross fertilisation of ideas usually results in a deeper and more critical understanding of the reading content.
- **Mind mapping** – This is a useful technique similar to brainstorming. It involves starting from a central focus and writing down ideas connected with it to form a 'web like' representation on the page.

- **Pre - questions** - This involves writing out a series of questions that you hope will be answered by the time you have finished reading.
- **Visual aids** – Sometimes seeing a picture or diagram connected with what you are about to read may help your understanding. There are many examples of this in the CIPFA open learning materials.
- **Advance organisers** – this involves trying to relate what you are about to read with something you already know. This may be prior knowledge, but it may relate to your background or experiences.
- **Review vocabulary** – Identify any words that you do not understand. Look them up to ascertain their meaning before you start to read the full text.
- **Consider the author** – Think about who has written the text. This is important when reviewing journals or articles. What is the background of the author? Are they likely to be subject to any particular bias?

3. How to be an active reader

In order to maximise the benefit from the reading you do, you should aim to be an active reader. The most important aspect of reading actively is being aware of the purpose of your reading. It is not enough to read aimlessly hoping that key themes will somehow 'sink in' and then eventually resurface in the examination room. In order to have a purpose you should have set your goals prior to starting to read. You can use these goals to focus on the parts of the text that are most relevant. Your brain will only absorb so much information, so it is vital that you are selective.

Active reading means reading with a view to understanding and relating the information to other things you have read or maybe have learned in a lecture. As you read you should test your understanding by thinking about what you have just read. Here are some ideas to help you:

- Restate ideas in your own words. You can do this at the end of a paragraph or sentence. This is particularly useful if you are reading a challenging piece of text.
- Form a mental picture of what it is the author is trying to say.
- Ask yourself if the text content reinforces, contradicts or adds new information to what you already know. Ask yourself why this may be the case.
- Answer the questions that you set yourself before you began to read.
- Define unfamiliar words
- Make notes or add to your mind map.
- Compare information from another source.
- Highlight or underline important pieces of text.

4. How to be a critical reader

How to think critically.

Some reading requires an ability to be a critical reader. Being a critical reader does not mean providing criticism it means that you are able to read with a questioning or critical mind. In order to be a critical reader, it is first necessary to be a critical thinker. Critical thinking is usually logical and reasoned, but not exclusively so. Critical thinking can be referred to as filtering, being able to separate the relevant from the irrelevant. It can be argued that it is also an ability to understand argument, recognise fallacies and distinguish premises from conclusions. Brookfield (1987) defined critical thinking as:

- Identifying and challenging assumptions
- Challenging the importance of context
- Trying to imagine and explore alternatives
- Reflective scepticism.

In other words, it is a questioning of the status quo.

Activity – Are you a natural critical thinker?

In order for you to assess whether you are a natural critical thinker. Tick the statements listed below that you agree with:

- "I hate talk shows where people just state their opinions but never give any reasons"
- "Figuring out what people really mean by what they say is important to me"
- "I always do better in jobs where I'm expected to think things out for myself"
- "I don't like making a decision until I have had time to think through all my opinions"
- "I don't like making notes based on someone else's, I prefer to read the material myself"
- "I try to see other people's opinions, even though I may not agree with them"
- "I don't like to give up on problems that are difficult"

- "I prefer to be told exactly how to do a job"
- "I don't waste time looking things up that I don't fully understand"
- "I prefer it when lecturers give out the answers rather than discussing the problems"
- "If my belief is sincere, then any other evidence to the contrary is irrelevant"

If you ticked any of the first 7 statements, you probably show some natural inclination towards critical thinking. Ticking the later statements show that you have some work to do!

Critical reading strategies.

Key attributes of thinking critically are:

- Analysing
- Logical reasoning
- Evaluating evidence
- Appraising and judging perceptively
- Seeing new relationships
- Synthesising
- Speculating creatively
- Designing
- Arguing rationally
- Transferring skills to new contexts
- Problem solving
- Imaging
- Thinking laterally.

These traits can be developed into a framework that you can use when reading, in order that you can become more critical. The framework forms the basis of a series of questions that you may ask yourself in order to elicit critical thinking.

Comprehension

- How would you compare?
- Interpret...
- What's the main idea about?
- Can you explain what is happening here?
- Which statement supports...?

Application

- How would you demonstrate your understanding of?
- What other examples can you find?
- What approach might you use if...?
- Give alternatives and reasons for a particular topic...
- What questions would you ask in an interview with...?

Analysis

- Why do you think?
- What motive is there?
- What inference can you make?
- What evidence is there to suggest that...?
- What is the relationship between?

Synthesis

- How could you improve?
- How would you adapt to...?
- How would you test?
- Can you formulate a theory for this behaviour?
- Can you construct an original model?

Evaluation

- Do you agree with this view?
- Assess the importance of...
- What would you cite to defend the actions of...?
- Based on what you know, how would you explain...?
- Justify your opinion...

Evaluation of information sources.

Before you select your reading, you need to evaluate its source. Of course, some reading that you do will already have been verified, such as the CIPFA open learning materials or recommended text books. However, it is becoming increasingly common to source articles and journals by reference to internet web sites. Anybody can put information on the internet, so before you use information obtained in this way, you need to ask yourself some important questions:

- Who is the author/source?
- What are the author's qualifications and reputation in the subject covered?
- Is the information on the site accurate?
- Is the information presented in an objective unbiased way?
- How does the site compare with other sites on the same subject?
- Does the site contribute something unique to the subject?
- Is the material on the site covered adequately?
- How current is the information?
- Is the site appropriate for the intended audience?
- Is the information well written?
- How well is the site maintained?
- Does the site tell you when it was last updated?
- Are there links to other sites and do they work?
- Do illustrations or pictures add value to the site?

Reflecting on your reading.

When you have finished reading you should reflect upon it. In this way, it is more likely that you will retain and internalise what you have read. Ask yourself the following:

- What have I learned?
- How does it add value to what I already know?
- Do I find the argument convincing?
- Given my knowledge about the subject, do I think that the main points may be correct even if they are not convincing?
- Can I think of information that may doubt the main points even if the argument is well presented?
- How does the text relate to other things I have read?

5. Note taking techniques and when to use them

Note taking is an important activity to undertake whilst reading for study. By writing notes, you can make a record of what you have read that can then be retained for revision or further study. You are also taking an active part in your reading.

How to take notes from a textbook.

When you first start to read a textbook, read a small section all of the way through (such as a chapter), but do not take any notes. It is tempting to start taking notes when you read the section for the first time. However, the objective of this first reading is to understand the material. If you begin to take notes now, you are in danger of starting to copy down too much information, without any true understanding.

When you have completed the first reading, locate the main ideas as well as important sub points. Set the text book aside and then try to paraphrase the information that you have read. By putting the material in your own words, you are forcing yourself to become actively engaged with the material. Don't write too many notes and try not to copy information directly from the textbook. Write enough detail to understand.

If you are not using a library book, then it is acceptable to highlight or underline key points. Again, be selective in what you choose to highlight. Many students are guilty of turning whole pages of text bright yellow! As you progress through the text, jot down questions that spring to mind or make possible connections with the knowledge that you already possess. If you come across lengthy pieces of text, make a note of the page and the paragraph number so that you can relocate the information, should you need to go back to it.

Try to develop your own shorthand (use abbreviations where you can) for key terms that are used repeatedly. You may also decide to represent your ideas visually in the form of a diagram, a table or a chart.

Here are some more tips for getting the most out of your note taking:

- Make sure you know what information you require before you begin to take notes and focus on it.
- Make a pre-list of the subtopics that you expect to find in the reading. This should guide your attention and may come in handy for labels for notes.
- Separate your notes between facts, theories and opinions that are presented.
- Use bullet points.
- Only copy out direct quotes that you think will be usable later.
- Try to make your notes logical. You could try using index cards to separate sub headings. Alternatively, try using different pages of a notebook to separate key topics or themes.
- Leave room in your notes for comments of your own. This is important if you are preparing to write a written response to a question; as your notes, suitably abbreviated, can form the first draft of an answer.
- If you are making notes from a library book, it may be useful to photocopy pages of text that can then be referred to later. If you have copied text, you are also able to highlight the text, which of course you cannot do with a library book!

Mind maps.

Mind maps are a powerful technique to improve the way you take notes. By using a mind map you can show the structure of a subject and the various linkages between its component parts. Because it is a visual representation, it is also a form that enables the brain to recall information more easily than using just the written word.

Mind maps are more compact than traditional notes. They are normally restricted to one side of A4 paper (this forces you to be selective about *what* you write down). If you do further work and find out additional information after the mind

map has been initially drafted, then this can easily be incorporated into the map, with little disruption, in the appropriate place.

Mind maps can also be used to summarise information, consolidate information from a number of different information sources and thinking through particularly difficult or complex problems. They can also be effective mnemonics. By remembering the two dimensional position of where things are located on a mind map can help recall the information. They engage the brain in the process of assimilating and connecting the facts more than the traditional form of note taking.

6. How to read more quickly

How people read.

People read at different speeds. In fact, we all vary our own reading speed depending on what and why we are reading. The speed that we read depends on the difficulty of the reading material; whether you enjoy the subject matter; the reading medium: a book, paper or computer screen; how tired you are and the quality and size of the type face. Other factors that will also affect the speed at which you read are:

- How you were taught to read
- At what age you learned to read
- How much reading you have done in your life so far
- Your level of concentration
- The extent of regressions and sub-vocalisation; (this is when you can hear yourself speaking in your head what you are reading)
- The type of material you are reading
- The medium that you are reading; and the quality of the writing.

What is your reading speed?

Your individual reading speed can be determined by calculating the number of words you read a minute. 'Words per minute' is calculated as the number of words that your eyes absorb per minute of reading time. Your reading speed varies even with the time of day. It is argued that the international average reading speed is accepted to be about 250 words a minute. At this speed, it is estimated that we retain about 50% of what we have read. When you bear this in mind, it becomes clear that in order to read for study, it is sometimes necessary to slow down your reading speed!

Activity- Calculate your reading speed

- 1 Count the number of words on three consecutive full lines of print.
- 2 Divide this by 3 to get an average number of words per line.
- 3 Count the number of lines of print that there are on the page.
- 4 Multiply the number of lines by the number of words on each line.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 5 | Count the number of pages read in a known time period. |
| 6 | Multiply the number of pages read by the number of words per page. |
| 7 | Divide the total words read by the time (in minutes) that you took to read them. |
| 8 | The result is your reading speed in words per minute. |

Why some people are slow readers.

Some common reading problems may be:

- You have too much to read in too little time
- Your concentration drifts whilst you are reading (Do you ever have to go back and re-read something because you have no idea what it said?). This is called regression.
- You can't remember what you have read
- Reading makes you fall asleep
- Skip-reading because you are running out of time

Reading groups of words at a glance.

Our eyes can only take in information when they are stopped. When we read we read in a move-stop-read-move-stop-read pattern. The less your eyes have to stop, the more we can read. You can achieve this by maximising the amount of words that you see at each stop.

Rather than look at one word at a time, you should aim to view the words in blocks. A more advanced technique involves scanning the text both horizontally and vertically at the same time. This requires a visual reading strategy. To do this you have to learn to trust your eyes. This means that you have to change your mental processes from 'see-say-understand' to 'see-understand'.

When you read blocks of words in one go, you also minimise or eliminate the problems caused by sub-vocalisation. Because you are effectively reading too fast for you to speak the words!

How to read more quickly.

Speed reading is an essential tool when you are studying. It helps to read and understand text more quickly and is useful when you have large amounts of text that have to be absorbed quickly.

In order to be effective at speed reading you need to know what it is you want from a text before you start reading it. In this way you can skim the document and extract the essential facts. You can then re-visit the relevant parts of the text that require deeper understanding and read these at a slower speed in order to maximise comprehension.

When we speed read we aim to increase the number of words that our eyes absorb in any block, reduce the length of time spent reading each block and reduce the number of times that our eyes find it necessary to revisit previous sentences. These are examined below:

It takes a conscious effort to train yourself to take in more words in each block, and practice makes perfect! One technique is to hold the text a little further away from your eyes (eyesight or spectacles permitting of course!). You probably take about a quarter of a second to take in each block of words. You need to train yourself to take a shorter period of time and you will become more effective at picking up the information more quickly – again this comes with practice. In order to reduce the number of times you have to re-read a previous sentence, run a pointer along the line of text as you read it. Your eyes will follow the line of the pointer and as such the smoothness of your reading will be improved.

Here are some more tips about how to improve your reading speed:

- Work on improving your vocabulary. When you come across a word you are unsure of, familiarise yourself with it, so that next time you come across it, it will not slow you down.
- Read more! The more you practice your reading the faster you will become.
- Don't feel you have to read every word – focus on the main points that are pertinent to your purpose for reading.
- Practice each day on reading 2 to 3 times more quickly than you normally would. You will find that your normal reading speed will increase after your skimming speed.

- If you have poor concentration, practice gradually increasing the time periods that you read.

When you have learnt how to speed read you will find that you engage in the following effectively:

- Preview material quickly and effectively before engaging in more detailed reading for comprehension
- Select your reading material carefully
- Adjust your reading speed to suit the material that you are reading
- Read large groups of words at one time
- Use a pacer to guide your eyes
- Read at the same speed that you think
- Read important information at high concentration levels
- Adapt your reading speed whilst reading
- Remember information for longer periods of time

7. How to read difficult or intensive material

It is sometimes challenging to read difficult or intensive material. Some academic articles can be written in language that you do not come across in everyday life. However, you should not shy away from reading such material; rather you should adopt strategies that will allow you to engage with it in an effective and valuable way.

Choose a small amount of the text to begin with. If you are attempting to read a textbook then select a chapter. This may be one that looks easier or you think will provide an oversight of the text.

Look to see how the material is organised. Scan the section and look for titles, heading and sub-headings. This will give you a general idea about what the section is about. Look also at diagrams and charts. These often summarise what is in the text.

Read the conclusion of the chapter. Sometimes the end of the chapter will list the main points that have been covered. Review the beginning of the chapter. This may list the objectives of what the text hopes to achieve or may present some key questions that it will address.

Read the text through for what you do understand and to determine the level of difficulty. Mark what you do not understand and make a note to return to this later. Every so often, look away from the text and ask yourself a question to stimulate your thinking relating to the text. Phrase the question positively and try to make connections and associations to other areas of knowledge or experience. The objective here is not to memorise, but to understand.

Look up any words that you don't know the meaning of but are key to your understanding of the material. Other words can be left until you have finished reading.

When you have finished reading, review the text to see what you have learned. It is now that you can go back and re-read the more difficult or unclear passages. You may find that this is more effective if you leave it until the following day. Make some notes on what you have read (see section 5).

8. How to retain what you have read

When you are reading for study, particularly when you will be examined on the content of what you read, it is important that you retain the information that you have read.

Individuals have different techniques they use in order to help them retain material. Indeed, many have been presented in this text so far.

These are some additional strategies that you may find useful:

- Re-read thoughts you have had and the notes taken during previous reading. These not only help to retain this information but can also help in the reading you are doing now.
- Answer questions. These may be narrative questions or they may be numerical. Practice applying the techniques you have read about by attempting past examination questions on that subject. You may also try to plan out a written answer and then compare it to the model answer. In this way you are consolidating and adding to the knowledge you already have, as well as getting valuable examination practice.
- Combine your notes from reading with notes taken from lectures or other sources. By doing this you are consolidating your knowledge and establishing connections and relationships between subjects or between different aspects of the same subject.
- Participate in a study group. Review reading together and talk through themes. You may try presenting two opposing sides of an argument.
- Test yourself – or test a friend.

9. Conclusion

By thinking in more depth about your reading, you should become better at studying. Reading is an essential element in any study programme, and CIPFA is certainly not an exception. By improving your reading techniques you stand to gain through improved comprehension, retention of knowledge and above all enjoyment from what you read. To be an effective reader requires practice. This booklet has aimed to help you start this process or continue along the road to improved reading skills. Remember that reading is not just a skill that you need to help you gain your qualifications, it is a skill that you will find valuable throughout life – so it's worth making the effort!

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