GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR ONLINE READING LISTS

Reading lists created using reading list management software have transformed how students interact with their modules’ assigned resources. But what are the benefits of online readings lists for students, and how can you ensure that these benefits are realised?

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RELEVANT RESOURCES WHICH ARE MANAGEABLE TO USE

On asking students what they expect to see on a reading list, 47% expect to see materials relevant to their modules. This seems a reasonable expectation, and academics agree. Philip Berners, for example, stated reading lists should “indicate to the students the resources relevant to the module content… [and] familiarise students with literature on the subject of their study.” Along with the relevance of materials, students also expect their reading lists to be manageable. One student stressed the “a lot of required reading can be overwhelming”, with academic colleagues agreeing that a key consideration when structuring a list is that what they are suggesting is feasible to read.

Top tips:

“The temptation is to provide an exhaustive list but this can be counter-productive. Consider the level of the module and adapt the reading list not only to the needs of the students but also to the learning outcomes.” – Katharine Cockin

“Reading lists are organic and need to be constantly updated. Don’t create it and leave it to become stale.” – Phillip Berners

This echoes a student comment that reading lists “sometimes might be outdated - changes haven’t always been made from last year’s reading list. When it shows last year’s reading it stops me studying ahead of time.”

CLEAR STRUCTURE AND GUIDANCE

Giving clear structure and reading guidance is also key for students, with 35% of those questioned mentioning this when asked what they find helpful about reading lists. Academics also identified structured reading guidance as an important benefit of using online reading lists. Katharine Cockin, for example, explained that her students find having “the Talis reading provided in a week by week format” very helpful. It is recognised, however, that this may not be appropriate for all disciplines. Roy Bailey highlighted this, explaining that he uses reading lists in a flexible way:

“For some modules of a more discursive nature, the reading list plays a substantive role; for others of a more formal analytical nature, the reading list plays a minor role, merely to identify a few relevant texts.”

This emphasises that the structure of a reading list can change depending on the nature of the module. However, student feedback demonstrates that all reading lists should be clear on:

- what to read
- when to read it
- why it will be useful

Comments indicate that students benefit from distinctions between set and further reading, well-ordered lists giving the most important readings at the top of sections, and precise information on important segments of a text.

Distinguishing the suggested use of resources can demonstrate to students how they can best engage with the material. When asked why they use reading lists, 52% of students expressly mentioned preparation for formal assessment, while 33% mentioned class/lecture preparation. One student summarised the thoughts of many, stating that they find it useful when a list “includes notes from the lecturer to say what class or essay each reading is helpful for”. This highlights that students are actively engaging with their reading lists in different ways for different purposes.

This benefit is also recognised by academic staff. The use of sub-headings, such as essential and further reading, can help make the purpose of a reading clear. Matt Lodder stated that he expects his students to “download weekly readings, and to use further reading as guidance for essays”, and similarly Tracy Robinson expects her students to “read the essential text each week… [and] use the further reading during exam season”. As stated by Katharine Cockin, “simply separating bibliographical items in this way can have a very significant effect on the students.”

Top tips:

“Use the section boxes… these make the lists much more readable and attractive. I sometimes make different boxes for different levels of readings, i.e. easier readings for students who are struggling, and more advanced readings for students who want to go more in depth. The separate module outline often has more detail, which I sometimes replicate with the notes function on Talis.” – Yuni Kim

“I now often set readings under three headings: case study, context, and theory. This is intended to help students understand how different kinds of resource help construct arguments.” – Matt Lodder

“Categorise items clearly: essential; further. Essential reading is the required preparation for the seminar/workshop. Further reading items will be consulted in order to broaden the preparation and help towards assessment. Consider also using subheadings for sections so that reading is clearly discoverable and related to the topics on the module.” – Katharine Cockin

“I structure per week relating the materials to the particular lecture/seminar for that week.” – Tracy Robinson
EASY TO ACCESS

Perhaps the most important facilitation of learning generated by using online reading lists is their ability to improve students’ access to materials. When students were asked what they find unhelpful about reading lists, 20% mentioned being recommended materials that they could not access. Adding resources to your online reading lists informs Library purchasing, hence ensuring that materials are made available wherever possible. This “guidance for the library to buy books” is recognised by Matt Lodder as a key purpose of his reading lists.

When preparing your reading list, it is important to be aware that resources take time to arrive, particularly where they are print materials. If you are unsure about the detailed structure of a list, you can always add the texts that you know you will be using initially, then develop the structure later.

Online reading lists also facilitate ease of access by enabling direct links to online resources. Of the students who specified a preference for having print or e-resources on their reading lists, 69% specified e, and only 8% wanted print alone. Providing e-access via online reading lists is an essential way to increase accessibility of materials, and, as Yuni Kim stated, “it is convenient for students to be able to click on the required readings to locate them online or in the library”.

Top tips:

“Create them as early as possible then you can easily add/update as further sources are available.”
– Tracy Robinson

“Ensure that requests for digitisation are made in good time so that the librarians can make it available when the students need it.”
– Katharine Cockin

“Use a variety of resources, not just books and journal articles - there’s a lot of relevant online content that can complement more traditional study resources.”
– Katy Wheeler

“Wherever possible an attempt is made to identify readings for which an electronic version is available.”
– Roy Bailey

EASY TO FIND

Including all readings on your online reading lists removes frustrations for students by bringing together all material in one place. As Loes Van Dam highlighted, “the many different places where relevant course information needs to be provided/displayed is unhelpful for students”. This is reaffirmed by students themselves, who commented that readings are “in so many different places.” By using online reading lists, students know where to access their material for each module.

Ensuring that you integrate your online reading list into Moodle takes this one step further, and is especially helpful if students are being directed to other learning resources via this platform. Students commented that they can find online reading lists difficult to get to, and expressed a clear preference for being able to access them directly on Moodle alongside other lecture materials. The benefits of this are summarised by Katharine Cockin:

“The advantage of the Talis reading list and Moodle combined is that students have access to the reading list and often fairly instant access to the reading itself, where it is digitised or already online. This provides a more effective and accessible approach compared with a bibliography simply listed in a module booklet.”

Top tips:

“Have a full online reading list in Talis and also import from that full list the essential and selected items into the Moodle for each week.”
– Katharine Cockin

“Publicise the lists to students on Moodle, in module guides and in class sessions on PowerPoint and assignment briefings - make it easy for the students to understand, easy for them to find, and drive them to use it.”
– Philip Berners
WE’RE HERE TO HELP!

We know creating an online reading list can initially appear daunting, but in following top tips from colleagues and students alike, your reading list can become a tool to facilitate a very successful learning experience. And perhaps the most important top tip to help you achieve this:

Top tip:

“Ask the library for help if you’re struggling as they are great and will always help out.” – Katy Wheeler

We have online guidance available on our website that takes you through the use of online reading lists: library.essex.ac.uk/rlhelp/staff

You can also contact us with any queries you have, or to arrange 1-to-1 or group training sessions:

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With thanks to all students and academic staff who contributed their thoughts and suggestions to this guide.

If you are interested in becoming involved in a follow-up project, email libread@essex.ac.uk.