How to Research / Read for an Essay

Many first year essays are written mainly from lecture notes, a chapter in the course textbook, and possibly some additional suggested reading. Whilst in the first year, you can get a good mark for a well-written essay that uses these sources alone, you will probably do better if you attempt to read a bit more widely. A number of studies have shown that essay grades are related to the number of sources cited. To get a really high mark, you are almost certainly going to have to demonstrate that you have read beyond what was given to you. Having said that, it is also possible to read too much. You've only got 1500 words at the most - its an essay, not a PhD thesis. Don't spend all your money on the photocopier and end up drowning in paper and worrying about how you can possibly make sense of it all.

Here are some tips for extending your reading.

1. Get to know the library and its catalogue.
Psychology is a broad church. This fact, in addition to the somewhat impenetrable cataloguing system used by our library, means that a lot of relevant books / journals are not stored in the "Psychology" section (QZ). Don't forget that all sorts of useful sources are to be found catalogued under biology (QP), linguistics (P), psychiatry (RC) sociology (HA), social psychology (HC), philosophy (BF) etc.

The computerised catalogue is incredibly useful. Learn to use it. You will need it for many of the tips below.

2. Follow up suggestions for "recommended further reading" at the end of chapters in textbooks, and on reading lists.
Don't try and read everything, just check out a few that look promising. If the source is a book, don't try and read it all - look at the table of contents to see if there are any chapters that look particularly relevant, or check the index for key words. Also try just reading the first and last chapters - these often provide a good introduction and summary of the key points. If the source is a journal article, give it a go - if it has been recommended in a textbook, it is probably reasonably accessible. Again, you can often get useful information from the just from the abstract, introduction and conclusion.

3. Use the library catalogue to do a "keyword" search on the content words in your essay title.
A topic that may only get half a chapter in your textbook may well have a dozen books dedicated to it. Keep an eye on their publication dates - something written in 1964 is going to be very dated. Again, you don't need to read the whole book - just glance at its table of contents / introduction for an idea of its relevance. If it looks good, read the relevant chapters.

4. Find an "alternative" textbook.
Just because there is a recommended course textbook, it doesn't mean that other similar textbooks can't be useful. There will almost certainly be other textbooks in the library, probably with a similar classmark to the "official" textbook. Different textbooks tend to present pretty much the same information, but you may find one that presents it in a way that better suits the purposes of your essay, or maybe one mentions a useful point and some supporting evidence the course textbook does not.

5. Try to get a sense for who the "key players" in the topic are.
 These will probably be the people whose ideas and research are described in the relevant textbook chapter. Maybe one of them has written a book, or a recent review article on the topic. Try an author search on WOS / Pubmed / ScienceDirect / GoogleScholar and the library catalogue.

6. Use WOS / Pubmed / PsycINFO / ScienceDirect / GoogleScholar to find some journal articles that look relevant and useful.

Journal articles can be very hard going to begin with, but the more you read, the easier they become. In the second and third years you will increasingly be expected to use journal articles as "primary" rather than "secondary" sources (e.g. you will be expected to have actually read the article itself, rather than read a description of it in a textbook). The sooner you start tracking down and reading journal articles, the better. Often, you will be able to get some useful information just from reading the introduction and discussion.

Review articles can be particularly valuable, as they provide a distillation of the key issues and findings for a specific topic, and are generally written by someone who is an authority on the subject (e.g. most psychologists probably agree with them). Most databases allow you to limit your search to review articles. Another trick is to include the word "review" in your search terms. Journals like Nature and Science, which publish important (but often difficult) articles, sometimes also publish commentaries on these articles in the same issue written by science journalists. These are often much easier to understand.

7. Learn how to get the full text of the article you need.

If you use WOS / Pubmed, you may find that for some of your search results you are offered a "full text" version. This means you can read online, or download / print out the complete article. This is very handy, as it saves you digging around in the library only to find that the one volume of Cognitive Science you really need is missing. If you don't mind reading on screen, it will even save you money.

At some point, you will probably find yourself reading the title and abstract of what looks to be the perfect article, only to find that it is published in something like "Zeitschrift Fur Psychologie" and the full text is in German. Unless you are bilingual, or have a bilingual friend who is prepared to do you a massive favour, there is not a lot you can do about this. Although working out how to limit your searches to papers written in English might be a start.

Slightly less annoying is reading the title and abstract of what looks like the perfect article, only to discover that the library does not stock that journal. Do not despair. First check whether the library has full text access to an online version of the journal. Do this via the electronic resources link on the library website.

Even if the library doesn't have the journal / online access, don't give up. Try typing the first author's name into GoogleScholar, along with a few key words from the paper's title – you may well get a link to a pdf. Providing they are still employed, most academics will have a homepage somewhere on the web. This homepage will probably include a list of their most recent / most important publications. If you're lucky, this list will link to full text versions that the authors have provided themselves. If they haven't provided links, try emailing them and asking if they'll email an electronic copy – most researchers are flattered when people express an interest in their research. Don't go too far and start asking them for help on the essay though… you will just be ignored.

The only completely guaranteed way of getting hold of an obscure article is to fill out an interlibrary request form. You will need to get this signed by your tutor, and it will cost you, but the British Library can usually get you a copy of even the most obscure article. This usually takes 7 - 10 days, although there is an electronic delivery service being trialed that may prove quicker. Either way, this is not an option for people who leave essay writing to the last minute.

8. Use the WWW

Try typing the key words of you essay title into a search engine like Google. BE CAREFUL: There is a vast amount of useful information on the web, but sorting the useful information from the even vaster amount of low quality and untrustworthy dross requires practice and patience. More importantly, it requires that you understand the topic sufficiently to know that what you are

reading is authoritative, unbiased and useful, as opposed to mindless and opinionated drivel. Information held by educational establishments (.ac.uk in this country, .edu in the states) can usually be trusted. The links provided by the library are also a very good starting point. http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/subjects/psych_internet.shtml

If, whilst surfing, you find the text of an actual essay that answers the same or similar question to yours, DO NOT PLAGIARISE IT. It is as easy for us to find these essays as it is for you, and we have ways to detect this kind of plagiarism very quickly. If you are foolish enough to pay for an online essay writing service, or pay for access to an online "essay bank", you will deserve what you get, both in terms of the essay's quality, and in terms of the consequences when you are caught.

The web is probably best used for tracking down specific items of information that you've been unable to find in textbooks or journals. For example, for a talk I gave to NHS managers about my research, I wanted to find out what percentage of the NHS budget gets spent on schizophrenia. This took about 3 minutes to track down on the web.

9. Talk to other students doing the same essay
As long as you avoid plagiarising each other's work (collusion), it can be a good idea to talk to other students during the planning stage. Obviously you shouldn't just expect other students to just let you photocopy that perfect article they found in Annual Review of Psychology that practically answers the question, and is only 4 pages long… Try to make sure you have something to trade or some ideas to share.