

Excerpting

When you really want to understand an academic text in detail, just reading it might not be enough. With an excerpt, you record the most important assertions of a text by summarizing them in your own words. This practice helps you to deeply understand a text and take note of its contradictions, ambiguities, and/or difficulties, and it makes the information from the text available for later use—ideally, if you’ve written an excerpt well, you won’t need to go back to the original. Excerpting involves paraphrasing a text in your own words. This can help you avoid so-called “patchwork paraphrases” in your final papers.

Before excerpting

- Relevancy check: Am I interested in the text? Is it important for my research question and/or central argument? Does it correspond to my level of prior knowledge? To assess these questions, look to the following: title, author, year of publication, table of contents, introduction and conclusion, bibliography, index.
- Record the bibliographical information for the source—the most common way to do this now is with a literature management program like Citavi (guides and online-courses for this program are available from the [Goethe University library](#)) or [Zotero](#).
- Activate your prior knowledge by asking W questions (what, who, how, why, what for, where, when).
- Tip for books: decide which passages to excerpt (based on their relevance to your question/thesis). Preliminary: understand the structure of the text to make sure you don’t pull passages out of their context.

What should you excerpt?

- Essential or foundational texts from your studies;
- Texts that could become important again at a later point in time (exams, thesis);
- Passages from texts that are particularly important for your current project.

How to excerpt?

Preparation:

- Keep thorough bibliographical records:
 - Physical location and signature (library)
 - Note the author on each page (e.g., in the footnotes of your document)
 - Make a complete reference for the works-cited list
 - Throughout the excerpt, make page references (trust me, it’s a life-saver!)



Excerpting:

- Skim the text and look up any unknown words.
- Start excerpting and approach the text
 - ... with a question or thesis in mind:
 - your excerpt should provide the answer to that question/support for the thesis
 - ... with a general interest:
 - your excerpt summarizes each passage (add one-sentence-wrap-ups of larger sections, chapters)
- You should always write excerpts in your own words. Use quotations sparingly! During the writing process, an excerpt made up of copy-and-pasted passages will be your enemy.
- Write your excerpt in full sentences. Sentence fragments or keywords are harder to decipher at a later point and might hide gaps in your understanding of the text.
- Your excerpt should at least cover:
 - the purpose and thesis of a text,
 - its most important supporting arguments, and
 - important terms, concepts, and their connections.
- Make sure that each part of your excerpt is understandable and readable—this may be time-consuming, but it saves you a lot of time and worries later.
- In the rare case of direct quotations, mark them clearly with quotation marks and page references.
- You can make additional notes in your document by placing comments, highlighting them in different colors, or, if you have one, add notes to your writing/reading journal.

Literature:

Franck, Norbert: *Lust statt Last. Wissenschaftliche Texte schreiben*. In: Franck, Norbert/Stary, Joachim (Eds.): *Die Technik wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens*. Paderborn 2003, P. 150.

Pyerin, Brigitte: *Kreatives wissenschaftliches Schreiben. Tipps und Tricks gegen Schreibblockaden*. München, Weinheim 2001.

Rost, Friedrich: *Wissenschaftliche Texte lesen und verstehen*. In: Franck, Norbert/Stary, Joachim (Eds.): *Die Technik wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens*. Paderborn 2003, P. 179-196.

Worksheet concept: *Writing Center of the European University Viadrina*.

