



Efficient reading strategies

Skimming

Sometimes you need to get the general idea or gist of a text. The way to do this is not by reading every word. Few text books were written with your specific course in mind. So you need to adapt the material to your particular purposes, given the course and the task at hand. Skimming is the sort of reading which would be appropriate if your tutor asked you to read several books and articles for the next tutorial. She would not expect you to be able to recite it word for word, but she will want you to be able to discuss the issues raised.

You might try reading quickly through the table of contents, the preface and the index, then selecting from the chapter headings. You can then read the first and last paragraphs, and perhaps the first sentence of each of the other paragraphs. Don't forget to check any diagrams and figures. You should get about 50% of the meaning from all this and you are then in a good position to see if you need to employ scanning or detailed reading.

Scanning

You skim read material to get the general picture. To find out precise information you will need to practise the technique of scanning. You may need to find out specific details of a topic for an assignment or a task that your lecturer has set. There is little point in skimming a whole book for this purpose. You should identify a few key expressions which will alert you to the fact that your subject is being covered. You can then run your eyes down the page looking for these expressions - in chapter headings or sub-headings, or in the text itself.

Detailed Reading

Some subjects such as law subjects and literature, for example, require a very detailed understanding from the student. This kind of reading is always more time consuming, but can be combined with skimming and scanning for greater efficiency. If it is a photocopy or your own book, take full advantage by underlining or highlighting and using the margins for your own comments or questions.

Revision Reading

This involves reading rapidly through material with which you are already familiar, in order to confirm knowledge and understanding. Maybe summarise main points on to small system cards (these can be bought at any newsagent's and then be carried around).

Stages in Reading a Text

In order to read more effectively, it is vital to become a more self-conscious reader. You need to understand what you are doing when you use different reading techniques for different purposes and texts, and to practise these particular reading skills. You must always read for a clearly defined purpose and adapt your reading strategies to that purpose.

It is important to break down the reading process into the following stages: before reading, during reading and after reading.

Before reading: you need to survey the text so that you can get an overview of the book, article or section.

First, get an overview of the text:

- understand the title
- examine the organisation of the information in the table of contents
- read headings and subheadings
- look at graphs, diagrams, tables
- read any questions or summaries at the end of the chapter
- read the introduction and conclusion
- read the first sentence in each paragraph

Now you are ready to read in detail the section/s which are relevant to your purpose.

As you read: you must closely follow the development of the ideas in the text:

- avoid the temptation to read **every** word
- read actively - write in the margins, highlight phrases, write summaries, take note of major and minor points
- read critically - Ask yourself questions; for example, is the argument logical? is it biased? is there enough evidence to support the author's conclusions? is the information dated?

After you read: you must think over what you have read. Make a **brief** summary of the main ideas and concepts in the text.

The following references are recommended for further reading and note-taking practice:

Tryeciak, J & Mackay, ES 1994, *Study skills for academic writing*, Prentice-Hall, Hertfordshire, UK.

Smith, M & G 1990, *Study skills handbook*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Fairbairn, G & S 2001, *Reading at university*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Goatly, A 2000, *Critical reading and writing* Routledge, London, UK.

Arnaudet, M & Barrett, ME 1984, *Approaches to academic reading and writing*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey.

LLOnline Reading: <http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/reading/>

Reading and Notetaking http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/tutorial/Reading_Notetaking.htm

Effective Reading <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/read.html>

Effective Notetaking from written texts <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/notemake.html>