Reading an Essay Under Pressure

Sample Process Description

The following essay is connected to p. 165 of *Acting on Words*.

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Most essays are written to impart a specific **thesis**, that is, a controlling idea and the writer's reasons for that idea. Effective readers come away with a clear grasp of the controlling idea and its reasons. When a short essay must be read as part of an examination or as part of pressured research, with a goal of re-stating the thesis and then providing a short critical response, readers apply a process of reading under pressure or reading for main ideas by scanning and skimming. This comprises four main steps: asking three questions, scanning the essay title, scanning the opening and closing paragraphs, and scanning the opening and closing sentences of each paragraph while skimming the rest of the paragraphs to observe methods of support. To practise this four-step method and to test progress, many readers do periodic speed comprehension tests.

Three key questions that readers ask are the following: who is the writer, who is the intended audience, and what does that intended audience likely assume about the apparent topic? Information about the author is often provided with the reading, as is information concerning the publication. If that information is not provided, however, then it is searched for (unless examination circumstance prevents a search). Under "literary credits," (often at the back of a text) almost all texts state where a certain piece was originally published, if that piece is a re-publication. Determining who wrote an item and where and when it was published helps readers to imagine the sorts of readers the writer is addressing: the audience.

This knowledge, in turn, helps a reader to decide what assumptions the intended readers might hold on the topic. If the topic appears to be sex education in high school, and if the intended audience appears to comprise middle class parents, the reader would imagine those parents concerned with the idea that high school years are delicate, volatile, and demanding, and that sex is a fraught subject often best suppressed; but these parents may also believe that high school should broaden humanistic learning. These audience attitudes can help the reader to determine the writer's strategy, since writers seek to appeal to readers. In particular, effective readers anticipate a fundamental underlying assumption that the intended audience may have on the topic -- what Stephen Toulmin calls a **warrant**. An essay arguing that city cats should be prevented from roaming would appeal to the warrant in many North American societies upholding the sanctity of private property. Anticipating a key warrant on the apparent topic (an attitude the intended readers probably take toward the topic) helps readers to apply the following three steps.

Step two takes readers to the **title**. The title often conveys both the writer's topic and controlling idea. An example is the title "Non-fiction Isn't Fact—Read With Care" (Varsava, p. 485). Other titles may not clearly state either the topic or the controlling idea. The title "The Right Stuff" (Suzuki, p. 464), for example, suggests that the controlling idea will assert a recommended way to do something, but the reader must read on to find out what that is. Titles may also contain allusions to other works. "The Right Stuff" alludes to Tom Wolfe's 1979 book of the same title and to the 1983 film, which Wolfe adapted from the book. Allusions help some readers to infer intentions, but knowing the allusions is not necessary because other guides to meaning come into play. Academic titles tend to be explicit, giving both topic and controlling idea, for example, "The Case for Active Euthanasia," p. 497. Titles seldom provide supporting reasons, however, and even university essay titles seldom offer sufficient information for a full grasp of the thesis. No essay title is ever complete in itself. The reader takes as many clues as possible from the title and moves on.

Step three comprises scanning the **opening and closing paragraphs**. Introductions almost always present the topic and usually point to surrounding context. Introductions

often hint at the writer's controlling idea, and sometimes even state it explicitly. Conclusions almost always re-state the writer's main idea or, at least, suggest it by commenting on an implication of that idea. Nina Varsava's essay introduction asks readers to imagine that she has written a memoir with an unintentionally incorrect detail. If someone notices that error, she asks, is her entire work invalid? Her opening also provides context: her question arises from controversy over the non-fiction book *A Million Little Pieces*, which was discovered to be significantly fictionalized. Varsava's final paragraph states directly that "we should accept and be constantly aware that the fiction/non-fiction divide is blurry at best" (p. 487, para. 10). From these two paragraphs, the reader suspects that Varsava's main point is an answer to her opening rhetorical question, and the answer, then, is that rather than blaming writers and publishers for possible inaccuracies, we should, ourselves, assume the responsibility of critical readers.

David Suzuki's first paragraph in "The Right Stuff" talks about high school as a time of intense experience and learning, a time that is often remembered long after later experiences are forgotten. The reader isn't sure from this what the essay will deal with specifically, but clearly it will have something to do with high school. Suzuki's final paragraph, however, begins as follows: "By starting their instruction with human sexuality and reproduction, teachers will be able to go on to practically every other subject in science" (p. 466, para. 7). This throws considerable light onto the somewhat vague beginning. While scanning these key locations, effective readers consider warrants (inherent attitudes surrounding the topic of sex education in the schools). The indirect opening becomes more understandable if one considers that Suzuki wants to establish common ground and good will before developing more explicit reasons to support the controversial topic of sex education. He wishes to appeal to his reader's belief in broad, humanistic education and downplay their concerns about their teenagers' coming of age. Opening and closing paragraphs convey a strong sense of the writer's central purpose and point.

Step four should remove any doubts. Step four involves **scanning the opening and closing sentences of each paragraph** while simply skimming the rest of the material. The topic sentence of Varsava's first body paragraph tells us that Oprah had recognized

and praised *A Million Little Pieces*. The concluding sentence of that paragraph calls on Oprah to use her own judgement. Skimming the material in between these two sentences, the reader quickly realizes that Varsava is reporting how Oprah, with righteous indignation, challenged the author and his publisher.

Suzuki's second paragraph begins by asserting that high school memories are intense because of puberty, an idea reinforced by the closing sentence of the paragraph. His third paragraph topic sentence introduces a personal story about visiting a school. The fourth topic sentence asserts that a school teacher had scared Suzuki with an idea that the pupils were wild and violent. The fifth topic sentence reveals that he began his presentation to the students by saying "I'm going to talk about sex." The fifth paragraph completion sentence reveals that the students were so interested that it was hard to dismiss them. A skim of the fifth paragraph reveals that Suzuki covered scientific topics. His sixth topic sentence states, "Science education in high schools should be designed around sex and human biology." His sixth paragraph concluding sentence asserts that today's high school students are going to find out about sex, regardless. Skimming the short paragraph reveals that Suzuki doubts that opponents of sex education will offer their children the necessary instruction; he also points out that easy access to explicit material is not a healthy substitute for "accurate facts." This scanning and skimming highlights the main things a reader needs to know.

From the information gathered through these four steps, the reader should have the main ingredients to state the essay's topic, controlling idea, and reasons. As the preceding examples demonstrate, a four-step examination of "The Right Stuff" concludes that the topic is whether to teach sex education in the high schools, the controlling idea supports the recommendation, and the reasons are that the subject is otherwise inadequately taught and that, as part of curriculum, it will spark interest in science. As the preceding examples demonstrate, a four-step examination of "Non-fiction Isn't Fact—Read With Care" concludes that the topic is how to read non-fiction, the controlling idea is to use care, and the reasons are that there is not and cannot be a clear line between fiction and non-fiction, that accepting non-fiction as truth is smug irresponsibility, and that the act of reading demands active thinking and judgement.

Books such as *Developing Reading Versatility* by W. Royce Adams contain readings with follow-questions. Readers use a stop-watch to time how long it takes them to scan and skim a test reading; without looking back at the reading, they then answer multiple choice or short-answer follow-up questions. A chart at the back of the book reports the words-per-minute rate scored by the reader. This rate does not mean much, however, if the follow-up questions are incorrectly answered. By applying the strategically guided scanning and skimming process described in this essay, readers who test their progress on a regular basis, using tests such as those of Royce Adams, usually discover that they are not only reading faster, they are reading more effectively.

Works Cited

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For Further Thinking

Review the three steps for organizing process description. Has the above essay applied those steps? Examine the essay closely and point out where the steps are or, perhaps, are not followed.

Practice

Use the basic material in the above essay of process description and rewrite it as a how-to essay for readers seeking direction on how to scan and skim. You do not have to refer to the two sample essays. You may deal with just one of them or substitute another essay to assist your illustration. See pages 158 - 163 for information on how-to writing (directional process). Keep in mind your reader (someone seeking active directions) and your purpose (providing those active directions). You may retain much of the above essay, but adapt its style. To test your success as a writer, make your how-to essay available for others seeking help with university-level reading and reading occasions. You might even set up an experiment by having readers of your essay test their reading speed and comprehension before and after reading your essay. Such tests and word-per-minute keys may be found in texts such as *Developing Reading Versatility.*