

## **UNIT 2**

### **READING AND INTERPRETATION SKILLS**

In this unit, we will focus on different reading strategies that one needs to employ when engaging in critical reading. These strategies will be discussed in detail below.

Outcomes:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which the purposes for reading influence reading strategies and the selection of relevant material.
- Apply techniques and strategies for speed reading, skimming, scanning and study reading.

#### **1. THE IMPORTANCE OF READING IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT**

Whether you are looking for information in books, newspapers, magazines, the Internet or any other source, your ability to read effectively is an important skill. As a student, reading is a very important skill.

Taking notes in class, studying, writing an essay or doing research all involve reading. Although, reading means different things to different people and skills vary with every individual, reading is a skill that can be improved. Weaknesses in vocabulary, comprehension, speed, or a combination of all three may be the result of ineffective reading habits.

#### **2. PRE-READING**

Pre-reading is useful in stimulating readers' prior knowledge about a topic. Pre-reading strategies help to actively involve students in the themes, concepts and vocabulary of a text even before they pick up a book to read.

When the knowledge that you already have in your mind about a topic is pushed to the forefront of your mind it is easier to make connections between what you are learning from the text and what you already know, predict what will happen next and sort out what you already know into mental folders that already exist in your brain.

Think about your reasons for reading the text:

- you are interested because it is about your subject, or it is related to your subject
- you want background information, or detailed information
- you want to know what the writer's views are
- you are going to have a discussion
- you are going to write an essay on this subject later

Each reason will influence the way you read e.g. quickly or slowly, looking for a fact or opinion.

Look at the title, headline, any sub-headings, photos or illustrations. Use these to predict what the text is about - the topic.

Think about what you already know on this topic.

Write down what you would like to find out from the text. You could write actual questions you would like to find answers to.

Make a note of words or phrases connected with the topic that you may find in the text.

### 3. DURING-READING STRATEGIES

During this phase, readers are continually engaged in connecting ideas, monitoring understanding, summarising and asking questions. In order to practise these strategies effectively, some during-reading strategies are discussed below.

There are various reading strategies available when you read a text. **You do not always have to read texts word for word and in depth.** This could be very time consuming and put you at a disadvantage in the competitive, knowledge-driven environment we live in.

#### 3.1 Speed reading

This is a technique that entails **reading quickly through the material without skipping** anything. Depending on the kind of text you are reading, there might be a need for the adjustment of the reading speed, for example when you are reading an easy, familiar, unfamiliar or difficult text the speed might be to change. Moreover, the purpose for reading determines the speed with which you read (study purposes versus relaxation).

### 3.2 Skimming

Skimming allows you to find the **main ideas or themes without paying attention to detail**. It is a technique of looking through the material quickly to gather a general sense of the topic and how it is organised. It is a fast process. A single chapter should take only a few minutes. It is especially useful when there are a few headings or graphic elements to gain an overview of a text. You can also read the introduction and first sentence of each paragraph. You do this by reading quickly through the text while skipping some of the material.

#### *Example*

- Skimming a Prospectus for information that is relevant to your module and/or department

#### *Advantages:*

- It can help save time
- It can put you in the right frame of mind for study
- It provides a context for further reading
- It can help you decide if a book or chapter is worth further reading, or if this is the information that you are indeed looking for

#### *A suggested skimming process:*

- Read headings, sub-headings, first sentences of paragraphs quickly
- Identify the key words
- Examine lists, illustrations, graphs, tables or diagrams and their captions
- Filter - find information on the topic you need
- Rank the information found in order of importance

### 3.3 Scanning

You use this strategy when you want to quickly **locate specific** information from a large volume of written material. You **do not read** every word. You look through something very **quickly** to find a **particular fact**. Think about the purpose of the index of a book.

#### *Examples*

- Scanning for a specific word in a dictionary

- Scanning your email inbox for emails from important people or with titles that need immediate attention

*Advantages:*

- It can help save time
- You can find specific information quickly, eliminating the information you do not need
- To avoid ‘information overload’

*When one scans a passage, the following tips can be applied:*

- Look at numerical or alphabetical clues
- Look at the spatial arrangements of columns and headings
- Look at bolded, highlighted or underlined phrases or sentences
- Note contrasts in the visual material, for example, capital letters in the middle of the sentence

### **3.4 Outlining**

With outlining, one reads through a text and formulates a broad outline of the main ideas.

This is done by using the following:

- Paraphrasing – writing out the main points in your own words; and
- Summarising – writing out the main points and not the details

*(Refer to unit 4 for a detailed explanation on the difference between summarising and paraphrasing)*

### **3.5 Intensive reading (or Intense reading)**

Intensive reading is detailed focused reading because your **purpose is to recall information**.

This type of reading requires **intense concentration** and **active involvement** in the text. You are required to **analyse** and **evaluate** information.

You usually use it once you have previewed an article and used the techniques of skimming and scanning to find what you need to concentrate on. Then you can slow down and do some intensive reading. This type of reading can also be beneficial as it helps readers understand vocabulary by deducing the meaning of words in context.

It moreover, helps with retention of information for long periods of time and gaining of knowledge. You will usually use this type of reading when you need an in-depth grasp of the subject matter.

### *Example*

- You are presenting a talk regarding the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its impact on teaching and learning in Higher Education and may be asked questions by the audience – you need to read the information on 4IR and Higher Education in depth.

### *A suggested reading process:*

- Who is writing to whom? (the author and the audience)
- What is the passage about? (the subject matter)
- Where does it come from? (context)
- How is the message communicated? Style and **tone** refers to the writer's manner of expression and use of language. The basic guidelines are that the style can range from informal to formal, sophisticated to unsophisticated.
- Why is the author writing this passage? (the intention)

### *Strategies for intensive reading*

- Know the purpose for your reading.
- Highlight relevant information.
- Select keywords or phrases in sentences, paragraphs or passages.
- Find the topic sentence; the sentence that best encapsulates the writer's ideas.
- As you read the text, ask questions and try and answer these questions as you continue to read.
- Paraphrase (write in your own words) to ensure that you understand what you have read.

### *Steps for intensive reading:*

1. **Skim the text for the main idea.** Skimming is the technique of allowing your eyes to travel rapidly over a page, stopping here and there to register the main idea. When skimming, you should follow the procedure below, adapting it to your purpose
- Read the title.

- Note the writer's name.
  - Note the date and place of publication.
  - Read the first paragraph completely.
  - Read sub-headings and first sentences of remaining paragraphs.
2. As you read, **pick up main ideas, key words** (words that tell you who, what, when, where, how many, and how much), and **transition markers** (words like 'however', 'alternatively', 'additionally', and so on), which suggest the direction of ideas in the text.
  3. While reading, **ask yourself questions such as *who, when, what, where, how***.  
Effective reading is active reading. To turn reading from a passive into an active exercise, always ask questions. To do this, you must be clear about the purpose of your reading, e.g. if you are gathering material for an assignment, formulate some tentative ideas about the approaches you might take, modifying them as you accumulate material. Find answers to your questions in the text.
  4. **Make notes in your own words** to facilitate recall. Some reasons for taking notes are:
    - to maintain attentiveness as you read,
    - to focus your attention,
    - to provide you with a summary of the material.
  5. Summarise. A summary is a **collation of your notes**, recording the main points the writer makes. Making a summary from your notes has two main benefits.
    - It allows you to test yourself on your understanding of the material you have been reading - sometimes it is only when you try to put the writer's ideas into your own words that you uncover difficulties.
    - It provides you with a compact account of the text for further reference.
  6. Review and reflect. To capitalise fully on the time you have spent reading an article or chapter, it is important to review and reflect upon what you have read. This enhances your understanding and helps you to commit important facts and ideas to your long-term memory.

#### 4. AFTER READING

Evaluate what you have read:

- How does it fit into what you already think and know?
- Does it confirm your ideas; add to them; conflict with them?
- If there are opinions, do you agree or disagree with them?

#### 5. UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU HAVE READ

In order to understand what you have read, carefully look at the following:

##### 5.1. Vocabulary

With the new words which you think are important, you can do the following:

- Try to guess the meaning using word function, context and word form
- Use a dictionary

##### 5.2. General sense

The meaning of a word may be implied by the general sense of its context, as the meaning of the word **incarcerated** is implied in the following sentence:

*Murderers are usually incarcerated for longer periods of time than robbers.*

You may infer the meaning of **incarcerated** by answering the question ‘What usually happens to those found guilty of murder or robbery?’ If you answered that they are locked up in prison, you correctly inferred the meaning of **incarcerated**.

##### 5.3. Examples

When the meaning of the word is not implied by the general sense of its context, it may be implied by examples. For instance,

*Those who enjoy belonging to clubs, going to parties, and inviting friends often to their homes for dinner are gregarious.*

You may infer the meaning of **gregarious** by answering the question ‘What word or words describe people who belong to clubs, go to parties a lot, and often invite friends over to their homes for dinner?’ If you wrote **social** or something like: "people who enjoy the company of others", you correctly inferred the meaning of **gregarious**.

##### 5.4. Antonyms and Contrasts

When the meaning of a word is not implied by the general sense of its context or by examples, it may be implied by an antonym or by a contrasting thought in a context.

**Antonyms** are words that have opposite meanings, such as happy and sad. For instance, *Ben is fearless, but his brother is timorous.*

You may infer the meaning of **timorous** by answering the question, if Ben is fearless, what is his brother like? The opposite, which is **fearful** or **scared**. That is the meaning of **timorous**.

When a sentence contains an unfamiliar word, it is sometimes possible to infer the general meaning of the sentence without inferring the exact meaning of the unknown word. For instance,

*When we invite the Makhubelas for dinner, they never invite us to their home for a meal; however, when we have the Dhlaminis to dinner, they always reciprocate.*

In reading this sentence you may infer that the Dhlaminis are more desirable dinner guests than the Makhubelas without inferring the exact meaning of **reciprocate**.

### 5.5. Drawing conclusions

Drawing conclusions refers to information that is implied or inferred. This means that the information is not clearly stated. Writers often tell you more than what they say directly. They give you hints or clues that help you "read between the lines." Using these clues to give you a deeper understanding of your reading is called **inferring**. When you **infer**, you go beyond the surface details to see other meanings that the details suggest or **imply** (not stated).

If you infer that something has happened, you do not see, hear, feel, smell, or taste the actual event. But from what you know, it makes sense to think that it has happened. You make inferences everyday. Most of the time you do so without thinking about it. Suppose you are sitting in your car at a red traffic light, and you hear screeching tires, then a loud crash and breaking glass. You see nothing, but you **infer** that there has been a car accident. We all know the sounds of screeching tires and a crash. We know that these sounds almost always mean a car accident. But there could be some other reason, and therefore another explanation, for the sounds. Perhaps, it was not an accident involving two moving vehicles. Maybe an angry driver rammed a parked car. Or maybe someone played the sound of a car crash from a recording. Making **inferences** means choosing the most likely explanation from the facts at hand.

### 5.6. Fact or opinion



Since writers do not always say things directly, it is sometimes difficult to figure out what a writer really means or what he or she is really trying to say. You will need to learn to distinguish between **fact** and **opinion**. Writers often tell us what they think or how they feel, but they do not always give us the facts. It is important to be able to interpret what the writer is saying so you can form opinions of your own. As you read an author's views, you should ask yourself if the author is presenting you with an established **fact** or with a personal **opinion**. Since the two may appear close together, even in the same sentence, you have to be able to distinguish between them.

The key difference between facts and opinions is that facts can be verified, or checked for accuracy, by anyone. In contrast, opinions cannot be checked. Opinions are what someone thinks or how he/she feels about an issue. Opinions by definition are subjective and relative.

#### Defining a fact

Facts are objective, concrete bits of information. They can be found in official government and legal records, and in the physical sciences. Facts can be found in reference books, such as encyclopaedias and atlases, textbooks, and relevant publications. Objective facts are what researchers seek in laboratories or through controlled studies. Facts are usually expressed by precise numbers or quantities, in weights and measures, and in concrete language. Specific technological data, birth records, historical documents, all provide researchers with reliable facts.

#### Determining an opinion

Opinions are based on subjective judgment and personal values rather than on information that can be verified. An opinion is a belief that someone holds without complete proof or positive knowledge that it is correct. Even experts who have studied the same issue carefully often have very different opinions about that issue.

Opinions are often disputed, and many times involve abstract concepts and complex moral issues such as right or wrong, fairness and loyalty. Abstract concepts, because they are not easily understood, can never be defined to everyone's satisfaction. For example, each of us holds a personal opinion about what fairness or loyalty is, about xenophobia and racism, and these issues always remain a matter of opinion, not fact.

Although opinions cannot be verified for accuracy, writers should, nevertheless, back their opinions with evidence, facts, and reason - by whatever information supports the opinion and convinces the reader that it is a valid opinion. A **valid** opinion is one in which the writer's support for his or her opinion is solid and persuasive, and one in which the writer cites other respected authorities who are in agreement. If a writer presents an extreme or unconvincing opinion, the reader should remain wary or unconvinced.

- Opinions are often expressed as comparisons (more, strongest, less, most, least efficient, but), e.g.

*Steve Jobs was far **more** innovative than any of his contemporaries.*

- Opinions are often expressed by adjectives (brilliant, vindictive, fair, trustworthy), e.g.

*Thabo Mbeki is a **convincing** speaker when he reads a prepared address but is not **effective** at press conferences.*

- Opinions are often introduced by verbs and adverbs that suggest some doubt in the writer's mind, e.g.

*It **appears** she was confused.*

*She **seems** to have the qualifications for the position.*

Become an alert and critical reader. Understand the differences between facts and opinions, and interpret and apply both into your critical thinking