



1. PREPARING TO READ

1.1 Introduction

Reading is an important skill for students. There are many reasons why people read:

- for pleasure and interest
- for academic success
- for information
- for understanding

Mistaken views on reading

- I just need to read over and over again, the key points will surely sink into my head and surface again when I need them.
- I read only what I am supposed to read, there's no need to fully understand and relate the information to other readings or to my course objectives.

1.2 Active Reading

Definition of active reading

Reading actively means:

1. Reading with an awareness of a purpose

This means you set **goals for your readings** – what information do you want to get out of the reading?

For example if you want to look for the definition of photosynthesis, you will not read a biology textbook from chapter one onwards but will be turning to chapters where you will most likely find the term “photosynthesis” mentioned and try to pick a description that suits your reading goal.

2. Using structures to construct an overview

This means you make use of the following to **give yourself a mental “road map”** to your reading:

- Chapter titles
- Chapter learning objectives
- Introductions
- Heading
- Sub-heading
- **Bold face**
- *Italicised type*
- Review questions
- Conclusions

More about Active Reading

Active reading means reading with a view to understand and relate the information to:

- Other readings
- Ideas and themes from lectures
- Goals of your course and your learning

There are **3 ways** reading specialists would view active reading.

1. Active reading involves checking your understanding, monitoring difficulties and checking for ways to correct difficulties.

2. Active reading is brain intensive, i.e., it involves thinking as you read and directing that thinking to achieve certain reading goals.

3. Active reading involves thinking about what is read rather than simply trying to memorise it. Often this thinking is aimed at mentally constructing a comprehension of the text by finding information related to your goals.

1.3 General Beginning Questions

One logical way of starting out is to pose a few simple **questions** before you begin any new reading. Depending on the kind of reading or the context of the reading, you might not always ask all these questions. Soon however, the questions you ask regularly will become part of the way you approach all readings.

Here are some questions you could ask yourself:

- What do I know about this author?
 - Has anything been mentioned so far in class or in other readings which gives me a hint about what to expect from this author?
- When was this piece of text written?
 - Does that time suggest any contextual information, which will help me understand the material or think critically about it.
 - E.g., a title such as “Equality in the Workplace” might be interpreted one way if it were written in 1967 and possibly suggest different issues if it were written in 1995.
- At what point in my course does this reading come?
 - What might I expect this reading to contribute to the development of the main concepts or themes in my course?
 - Why am I reading this? Is it for class discussion? For an essay? To review an exam?
- What structures can I rely on?

Below are the structures that will assist you better in your reading:



1. Introduction
2. Summary
3. Chapter Goals
4. Headings
5. Sub-Headings
6. Key Words
7. Glossaries
8. Graphs
9. Charts
10. Visual Aids

2. SKIMMING AND SCANNING

2.1 Skimming

To Skim

- It is to get an overview of the material you are planning to read.
- Look quickly through the text for titles, sub-headings as well as key words, phrases and sentences.
- Get the gist of the text and spot relevant bits to come back to.
- Read with a purpose when you skim.
- Ignore the details and examples.

How to skim a paragraph

All writing, regardless of length has

- a beginning - where the main concerns or themes are outlined
- a middle - where these are explained by arguments or points developed and examples discussed
- an end - where the writer shows how the points made in the middle relate to the ideas outlined in the beginning and (usually) modifies them

The principles of skimming a paragraph apply equally to longer passages, sections or chapters. To do this, you

- Look for the organisation of ideas and spot the topic sentence.
- Use the structure of writing and note the markers.

1. What is a Topic Sentence?

A topic sentence introduces the topic of discussion.

2. What is a Marker?

Markers are linking words.



How to skim a chapter

When you skim a chapter, section or article

- look for the main ideas in the same way as with a paragraph
- use the **features** of chapter layout to help you

Features of a chapter layout:

- Note the chapter **headings** and **subheadings** and **layout** of the pages. (Do you need to read the whole chapter?)
- Look at the end of the chapter or document to see if there is a **summary**. If there is, read it *first*.
- Are there any **diagrams**? If you understand them, they will help you understand the text more quickly.
- Read carefully the **first paragraph** of the chapter (and of each section). It introduces the topics to be covered.
- Read the **first sentence** of each paragraph. These will usually be the topic sentences.
- Read the **last paragraph** of the section or last two paragraphs of a chapter for the conclusion.

2.2 Scanning

To Scan

- It is to find a particular piece of information or the answer to a particular question.
- This can be easily done, especially if the data is arranged in alphabetical order.
- Scan the numbers and letters until you reach the general area where what you are looking for should be.
- Look for clues such as capitalized words, subheadings and paragraphing.



3. SURVEYING BOOKS AND WEBSITES

3.1 Surveying Books

By far the most important skill in choosing a book is

- deciding how useful a book is going to be to you
- having the confidence to reject books which are not appropriate to you or your present purpose

To do this you need to have a sense of a book's **level** and **relevance** before you start to read it.

Characteristics of a book

Title:

- Obvious but necessary
- Is the book on the **subject** or an **aspect of the subject** you want?

Subtitle:

- This often indicates the **level of difficulty** or **style of approach** to the subject.
- Examples: "a new approach", "a student's guide to", "a handbook of"

Author:

- Can you **trust the author**?
- There is often information about the author's qualifications, life or experience on the title page or back cover.

Date of publication:

- This is given on the back of the title page.
- With some books (e.g. textbooks) it is important to know **how up to date** it is.
- New does not mean good. A book may have several editions, each one including changes that update it.

Blurb:

- This is the **write-up by the publisher** of the book.
- It is printed on the back or the inside cover.
- View it critically - it is designed to sell, but it can give an idea of the **style** and **purpose** of a book.

Publisher:

- A publisher may have good **reputation** in a particular area.
- If it is published in the USA or other countries, this may tell you something about the book's particular **approach**.

Table of Contents:

- The chapter headings give an **outline** of the areas the book covers.
- Look to see if there is a detailed breakdown of the content of each chapter, with page references.

Preface:

- This is written by the author.
- It explains **the thinking behind writing the book.**

Index:

- To **locate a particular topic**, scan the index at the back of the book.
- It should give you the page reference of every instance the topic is discussed in the text.

Appendix:

- This preserves **detailed information**, which if inserted in the main body would interrupt the smooth flow of the narrative.
- It contains information not strictly related to the argument of the report but which is of interest to the reader.
- Examples are statistical data, tables and graphs, worked examples.

Bibliography:

- The bibliography lists the printed **sources** and **interviews** used in gathering data for the report.
- Even sources that do not appear as footnotes should be included in the bibliography if they have provided background information for the report.

Footnotes :

- Footnotes give credit to the source of information.
- They support generally unaccepted statements.
- They explain or provide additional information.
- They identify quoted material.
- They refer the reader to other parts of the report.

References:

- References are used for confirmation and **further study**.

3.2 Surveying A Website

Like reading a book, you would also need to skim and scan the Web pages for relevant information. In order to make the reading of Web-based text easier for readers, you must be aware of some of their characteristics. Only then can you select and reject the information in the Web page discriminately.

Characteristics of a Web page

1. **Layout and Design**

Layout - Linear:

- Information in Web pages is either linearly or non-linearly organised.

- A **linear** layout consists of lines or rows of texts and/or graphics, arranged one after the other.
- The user is only required to scroll down to read the contents of the Web page.

Layout – Non-linear:

- Unlike a linear layout, a **non-linear** layout is more interesting for readers.
- The contents are arranged in such a way that users can choose to click on the highlighted text or buttons located at the top/bottom/left/right of the Web page.
- These buttons and texts are known as hyperlinks.
- Hyperlinks have a similar function as the table of contents of a book. They allow users to go to the sections that they find relevant.
- The centre of the Web page will then feature the detailed contents of the sections they select.

User interface:

- A Web page can either have a text-based or graphical user interface (GUI).
- If it is **text-based**, then the Web page contains largely text, and is usually devoid of graphics and animation.
- A **GUI**, on the other hand, involves the use of hyperlinks (both hypertexts and image links), colours and attractive multimedia elements [**This involves a mixture of different media like text, graphics, animations, audio and even video clips to present information to users**] to make the Web page more attractive.

Interactivity:

- A Web page is said to have a high level of interactivity if it consists of a lot of activities to engage the user.
- Examples of interactive activities are quizzes, pop-up hints and managed chat rooms.

2. Navigation and User Friendliness

Attention to technical details:

- At times, there are technical details such as broken links or interactions that do not work. Web site administrators should perform regular checks to avoid such problems or at the very least, to minimise inconvenience to users.
- For example, pointers to placeholders for content under development can be used.

User control:

- A Web page that is user-driven is one that allows users to move on and click hyperlinks of their choice. This is more engaging and interactive for the user.
- On the other hand, a Web page with minimal, or no, user control restricts the movement of the user in the Web page or Web site. Web pages with linear layouts tend to have this problem.

3. Content

Quantity:

- The amount of information available should be adequate and thorough. Sufficient details should be provided in a clear and readable way.
- Search engines could also be provided to facilitate easy locating of information.

Organisation:

- If A Web page is well-organised, its content is grouped under clear and appropriate headings. At times, some of these headings function as hyperlinks. This makes it easier for users to locate specific information.
- Examples of how the contents of a Web page can be organised are topically, sequentially or hierarchically.

Credibility:

- It is important that users be assured of the credibility of the information provided.
- One way in which this can be done is to provide the source of the information in the Web page. For example, the contact number, address and/or the email address of the source can be given so that users can refer to the source for enquiries, clarification or to provide feedback.
- High-quality graphics, good writing, and use of **outbound hypertext links** can increase credibility.
- Users should also check that the information provided is up-to-date and accurate.

Group work (Task 1)

Read the passage that is assigned to you.

1. Skim for organisation of ideas.
2. Scan for answers to the questions listed at the end of the passage.
3. Identify the features in the passage which have helped you to complete the task.

Individual + Group work (Task 2)

Individual: Bring a book on a technical topic to class.

Group: Share with your group members how you selected the book using the guidelines of surveying a book.

Individual + Group work (Task 3)

Individual: Before the class, visit a designated Web page.

Group: Share with your group members how you went about surveying the Web page using the list of characteristics taught.

Words That Camouflage

People use words, of course, to express their thoughts and feelings. And as everyone knows who has tried to write, choosing just the right word to express an idea can be difficult. Nevertheless, it is important to choose words carefully, for words can suggest meanings not intended at all; words can also be used to deceive. In order to express ourselves accurately and to understand what other people express, we must be aware that words can camouflage real attitudes; English is full of examples.

Take, for instance, the language of advertising. Advertisers obviously want to emphasise the virtues of their products and detract from the product's faults. To do this, they use carefully chosen words designed to mislead the unwary customers. Carl P. Wrighter in his book *I Can Sell You Anything* has dubbed these expressions "weasel words", which the dictionary defines as words "used in order to evade or retreat from a direct or forthright statement or position".

Let's say, for example, that the advertiser wants you to think that using his product will require no work or trouble. He cannot state that the product will be trouble free because there is usually no such guarantee; instead, he suggests it by using the expression "virtually," as in this product is "virtually trouble free". The careless listener will ignore the qualifier "virtually" and imagine that the product is no trouble at all. Another misleading expression is "up to". During a sale a car dealer may advertise reductions of "up to 25 percent". Our inclination again is to ignore "up to" and think that most of the reductions are 25 percent, but too often we find that only a few products are reduced this much. The other day I saw a sign on a shoe store advertising "up to 40 percent off" for athletic shoes. Needing some walking shoes and wanting a good bargain, I went in, only to find out that there were only a few shoes marked down by 40 percent, most of the shoes weren't even on sale.

A second example of words that camouflage meaning is euphemisms. A euphemism is defined as "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant".

We often use euphemisms when our intentions are good. For instance, it is difficult to accept that someone we love has died, so people use all kinds of euphemisms for death such as "She passed away", "He's gone to meet his maker", or "She's no longer with us". To defend against the pain of such a reality some use of humorous euphemism, "He's kicked the bucket". To make certain jobs sound less unappealing, people use euphemisms. A janitor is now a "custodial worker" or "maintenance person". A trash man may be called a "sanitation engineer". Such euphemisms are not harmful, but sometimes euphemisms can be used to camouflage potentially controversial or objectionable actions. For example, instead of saying we need to raise taxes, a politician might say we need "revenue enhancement measures". When psychologists kill an animal they have experimented with, they prefer to use the term "sacrifice" the animal. Doctors prefer "terminate a pregnancy" to "abort the foetus".

A final example of language that conveys unintended impressions is sexist language. Sexist language refers to expressions that demean females in some way. For instance, when someone refers to a grown woman as a "girl", the implication is that she is still a child. Therefore, instead of an employer saying, "I'll have my girl type that", what

should be said is, “I’ll have my assistant (or secretary) type that”. Other offensive expressions include “young thing” as in “She’s a cute young thing”. The proper term, “girl”, should be used in this case, since the “thing” is a young female. Further names of many jobs suggest women should not fill these positions. Thus we use “chair” or “chair person” instead of the sexist “chairman”. Likewise, a “foreman” should be called a “supervisor”.

We must always be careful to choose the words that convey what we really mean. If we do not want to give offence, then we should always be on guard against sexist (as well as racist) language. If we do not want to be misled by advertisements, we must keep our ears open for weasel words. Finally, when we use a euphemism, we should be aware that we are trying to make an idea more acceptable. At times this may be preferable, but let’s not forget that euphemisms camouflage reality. After all, “colouring the truth” is still lying.

(Extracted from “Refining Composition Skills”, Heinle & Heinle Publications)

Questions for practice on “Scanning”:

1. Why do people use words?
2. What is the title of Carl P. Wrighter’s book?
3. What are weasel words?
4. What is a euphemism? Find 2 examples from the passage.
5. What do you think is the author’s view on the use of sexist language?
6. According to the author, why must we choose words carefully?

Suggested answers to Task 1:

1. The ideas are organised according to examples – language of advertising, euphemisms and sexist language.
2. Answers are underlined in the passage of tutor’s copy.
3. Answers will vary and can be any of the following features that the students would have used to help them skim and scan the passage:
 - Look for the organisation of ideas and spot the topic sentence. [A topic sentence introduces the topic of discussion.]
 - Use the structure of writing and note the markers. [Markers are linking words.]
 - Features of a chapter layout:
 - Note the chapter **headings** and **subheadings** and **layout** of the pages. (Do you need to read the whole chapter?)

- Look at the end of the chapter or document to see if there is a **summary**. If there is, read it **first**.
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Some guides to help one scan a piece of material effectively:

- Have a question in mind and scan to find a particular piece of information or the answer to a particular question.
- It helps if the data is arranged in alphabetical order. Scan the numbers and letters until you reach the general area where what you are looking for should be.
- Look for clues such as capitalized words, sub-headings and paragraphing.

Suggested answers to Task 2

Be reminded to pick a book of a topic related to your course of study for this Task.

You may choose any of the following features:

Title:

- Obvious but necessary
- Is the book on the **subject** or an **aspect of the subject** you want?

Subtitle:

- This often indicates the **level of difficulty** or **style of approach** to the subject.
- Examples: “a new approach”, “a student’s guide to”,
- “a handbook of”

Author:

- Can you **trust the author**?
- There is often information about the author’s qualifications, life or experience on the title page or back cover.

Date of publication:

- This is given on the back of the title page.
- With some books (e.g. textbooks) it is important to know **how up to date** it is.

- New does not mean good. A book may have several editions, each one including changes that update it.

Blurb:

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Suggested answers to Task 3

Here are some websites you may want to start with, or your tutors may offer other relevant websites as examples:

<http://www.nyp.edu.sg>

<http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/>

<http://www.moe.gov.sg/>

<http://www.science.edu.sg/ssc/index.jsp>

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Navigation & User Friendliness

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- High-quality graphics, good writing, and use of **outbound hypertext links** can increase credibility.
- Users should also check that the information provided is up-to-date and accurate.