

Before you commence your reading, make sure you have a number of questions related to your purpose to focus on. Depending on the purpose and your questions, you can then adopt a number of strategies to make your reading effective, focused and critical. The following 4-S<sup>1</sup> reading method provides an approach you can take to improve your reading.

<b>Search</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the article laid out?</li> <li>• What are the sections?</li> </ul>
<b>Skim</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at the abstract, intro, headings, topic sentences, key words</li> </ul>
<b>Select</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which sections or paragraphs are relevant to me?</li> </ul>
<b>Study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closely read the relevant parts and take notes</li> </ul>

## Search out the structure

Begin by quickly glancing at the structure of the text to identify the layout. This will help you to identify all the structural elements of the text and assist you to skim and scan and get an overview of the entire text. This will make closer reading easier. This technique can be particularly useful when reading a textbook but can also be used for journal articles and other texts. Most textbooks are structured in levels – firstly by unit or topic, then by chapter, then by sections or subheading.

- Examine the contents page. Do any of the chapter headings or article titles look relevant to your topic or issue?
- Check the index at the back of the book for more specific information. If you are reading an electronic source, search for particular words or phrases (Ctrl + F/Command + F).
- Take note of how the chapter/article is set out. Does it contain an abstract, introduction, conclusion, summary of the main findings etc.? Is it divided into different sections with subheadings? What do the headings and subheadings tell you about the focus of the source?

## Skim the text

Now that you are familiar with the structure, skim read the abstract, introduction, conclusion, subheadings, and the first sentence of every paragraph (i.e. the topic sentences) to gain an overview of the author's main ideas and arguments, method, theoretical approach, case studies etc. It will help you to decide what is relevant/irrelevant information as you are focused on locating specific material to read more carefully. Skimming also assists you in getting an understanding of the topic of main arguments of the paper that makes a closer reading easier. Therefore it is very helpful when reading particularly complex or dense texts.

Your major purpose in skimming is to find out whether the author is actually discussing matters relevant to your topic and to identify what will be truly useful for you to read intensively. Ask yourself: what **precisely** is the author talking about? What is the author's position in relation to the topic? Then:

- Read the introduction intensively to determine the author's purposes — precisely what she/he sets out to do and why. Perhaps the argument to be developed will be mentioned and/or the conclusions reached will be stated. It can also be useful to read the conclusion intensively at this stage;

<sup>1</sup> Paula Boddington and John Clanchy, *Reading for Study & Research* (Australia: Longman, 1999), 16-17.

- Read quickly through the sub-division headings trying to work out what might be more or less relevant for your topic; and
- You can now begin to **skim read first and/or last sentences** in the paragraphs. These are **topic sentences** that carry the main ideas or generalisations that the author wants to develop. These main ideas are brought forward to support his/her position — the overall thesis being developed.

## Select the key material

Based on your searching out the structure and skimming, you are now in a position to better identify which parts of the text need to be read closely. Depending on the purpose of your reading, you may decide that the entire text needs to be read intensively or you may only need to read one section or paragraph. After skimming you may also decide that you do not need to read this particular text any further as it may not be relevant to your particular topic or assessment task. Mark the particular sections with a highlighter or pen so that you can easily find them again. Try not to get distracted by reading intensively at this point as you want to get the full overview first.

Whilst the first three steps can take some time, they will save you time in the longer term by enabling you to focus your reading on the parts of the text that you need for that particular purpose.

## Study the relevant parts

Once you've identified what is relevant, next you need to take the time to read the text closely. You may need to read important sections more than once. At this stage, it is important to take good notes. Also you should aim to try and summarise the author's argument/position. If you find words or terms that you are unsure of you may also need to consult external sources (a discipline-specific dictionary, websites, general texts etc.).

Critically engaging with the text means to:

- Analyse the logic of the author's argument; and
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the argument/evidence in relation to other readings.

When closely studying a section of the text, examine the reasoning developed by the author and what conclusions they draw from this reasoning. Look for the connections made from one conclusion to the next. Question the assumptions and assertions made by the author and whether their reasoning and conclusions are convincing and reasonable.

## Reference:

Boddington, Paula and John Clanchy. *Reading for Study & Research*. Australia: Longman, 1999.