Reading

1. Reading Efficiently
What do you do when you read? Do you start at the beginning and read the words on every line until you get to the end?
A method that you might find more productive is to:

   - **survey** the text
   - **skim** it to get the gist of it, then, if you need to,
   - **read for more detail**.

You might also be trying to locate some specific information on a page, in which case you would need to **scan** the text.

Read on to see how these techniques can help make your reading much more productive.

Surveying

- **What is it?**
  This is a technique for quickly identifying the content of a text. It’s what we do when we pick up a book or magazine and have a quick look at what it’s about before we buy it.

- **How is it useful?**
  It helps you to identify those readings most relevant to your particular purpose, how information is presented and the overall organisation. It can help you to familiarise texts so you know where to look for information when you need it, as well as determine if a book or journal is suitable for a particular purpose.

- **How do I do it?**
  - Read the title and any cover blurb and try to predict the content.
  - Look at the contents page and index to see which topic areas are covered.
  - Flick through the book, looking at key words in chapter headings and major sub-headings.
  - Read the introduction or preface of a book, or the abstract of a research article, to get a summary of the content.

Skimming

- **What is it?**
  We skim when we look quickly over a chapter or article to get a general idea of what it’s about and identify the main ideas. In general reading, we do this when we quickly look at a newspaper or magazine story before we decide whether or not to read it in full.
• **How is it useful?**

Because you might not have time to read everything, skimming can help you to select only those texts that are useful and relevant to your study purpose. It gives you a quick overview of an article or chapter. In this way, it helps to build up your initial schema (what you know about a particular topic) as background information for classes or to prepare you for further reading or study.

• **How do I do it?**

- Read the title and any sub-headings quickly and try to predict the content of the text. It doesn’t matter if your original prediction is wrong; it’s only a warm up exercise for your brain and, of course, you adjust your thoughts to any new information you gather as you go along.
- Move your eyes very quickly across the pages, taking in text features such as diagrams, lists, numbering sequences, bold print, italics or underlining use to highlight key words.
- Read the abstract of a journal article because it summarises the main points of the article; read the introduction of a chapter because it identifies the topic and focus and enables you to preview the main ideas.
- Read the first sentence of each paragraph because this is often the topic sentence, which contains the main idea of the paragraph.
- Look for key words that identify the topic and focus.
- Look for linking words, which help identify the relationship between ideas and give direction to the text. Some examples of these words are: therefore, in addition, however, because, resulting in, since. Look for compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution, listing, and time sequences.
- Read the final paragraph, conclusion or final summary.
- Skim again to clarify the main ideas. Don’t read in detail, although you might slow down for new information, which takes longer for your brain to process or link in with your existing schema.
- Mentally review the main structure of the text.

By focusing on key points, skimming helps you to build up your initial schema. This is important because your ability to take in what you read depends on your ability to integrate new information with knowledge you already have.

But, you might ask, what if I miss out on important information because I’m not reading every word? This is not usually a problem with many types of reading (but it is often not so useful when you have to read text books full of technical information – see [Learning Links: Reading a Text Book](http://www.rmit.edu.au/studyandlearningcentre)). Try these two activities:

**Learning Activity**

1. Read the following quickly:

   _The cat sat_

   on the

   the mat

   Now, read it more slowly, reading each word at a time. Notice the extra ‘the’ this time?

2. Quickly read this and count the number of F’s:

   Feature films are the result of years of scientific study combined with the experience of years.
How many do you think there are? Most people get three or four. However, if you look carefully, there are six. Most get the F’s from Feature films because they’re key words, but miss the F’s in of and in scientific.

So, not only do we not need to read every word on the page to make sense of text, we actually don’t consciously read every word anyway.

Here’s a chance to practice skimming by looking for the topic sentences in paragraphs. Good paragraphs have one idea, which is usually found in one of the sentences (the topic sentence). It’s often the first sentence, but not always. If it is, it makes skimming very easy. If it’s not, with practice you can usually quickly identify it.

Look at this extract from a psychology text and try skimming by reading only the first sentences of each paragraph.

In a sense, social problems are always individual problems, for it is individuals who experience their adverse effects. We call them social problems for two reasons: first, because they affect such a significant proportion of people as to constitute a threat to the welfare or safety of the whole group, and second, because they cannot be adequately met by individuals. If they are to be solved at all, it must be by some kind of group action. This becomes clear when we consider such major social problems as widespread poverty, disease, recurrent periods of mass unemployment, crime, family disorganization, and war.

Larger societies often contain important subgroups with differing cultural patterns, and they are likely to be subject to inconsistencies, strains, and conflicts that speed up social change and that often are intensified by it. As would be expected, then, a large modern society is much more likely to possess complex social problems than a smaller one.

When we attempt to define and study any particular social problem, we encounter certain difficulties. For one thing, every social problem is closely related to a number of other social problems, and is therefore highly complex. To fully understand one of them we must know something about the others. Thus, to understand fully the problem of family disorganization and divorce we may, for example, need to know something about bad housing, unemployment, and social classes.

There is seldom any simple or complete solution for a major social problem. The causes are always complex, and practical remedies are difficult to find. Moreover, the action necessary to solve or mitigate a social problem may be effectively blocked by public indifference and ignorance and by the opposition of vested interest. This does not mean that all attempts at social improvement are useless. It does mean, however, that a number of our major social problems are likely to remain with us in some form or degree for the indefinite future.

How did you go? This writer generally writes the topic sentence first in each paragraph, so you should have been able to get the gist of the text by just reading the first sentence (although the topic sentence was last in the second paragraph). Notice that all other sentences in each paragraph give more information, examples, evidence, etc, for the main point.

So what about the rest of the information, you might be asking. Isn’t that important too? You need to decide this. We skim to give us a general idea about the information, but you also need to read with questions in mind, particularly the question: ‘What’s my purpose in reading this text?’ (For more information about asking questions when you read, see Learning Links – Reading Actively). If you need to get an in-depth understanding of the text, then you’ll need to read it again for detail.

**Scanning**

- **What is it?**
  Scanning is a reading skill we use to quickly locate specific information; for example, when we check a phone number in a directory or look at an index to find out the page number of an article. When you scan, you know what you’re looking for (eg key words, dates, etc) but need to locate it on the page; when you skim, you’re looking for the main ideas of a text.

- **How is it useful?**
  Scanning is useful when you want to find out specific information. It can help to save time by quickly locating particular information that is relevant to your study so you avoid reading unnecessary material. You can use it to find out more detailed information to support an argument in academic writing, clarify something, check the bibliographic details of something that you’ve cited or in any situation when you want to quickly and easily find the answer to a question.

- **How do I do it?**
  - Decide what you’re looking for: a key word or phrase, date, name.
  - Disregard all information that’s not relevant to what you’re looking for. (If something looks as if it could be useful for another part of your research, mark it quickly so that you can come back to it later; don’t let yourself be side-tracked).
  - Move your eyes systematically over the text, looking for the information you need.
  - Use peripheral vision to help scan the page quickly.
  - When you’ve found what you’re looking for, slow down and read carefully around it. It may be necessary to go back and read information leading up to the key word to help you understand the context in which it is being used.

Now practise some scanning:

**Learning Activity**

What key words or phrases should you scan for if you wanted to find answers to these questions?

1. Do you need to write up an incident report for accidents that involve visitors to a hospital?
2. Will insurance benefits of health professionals remain in force if they don’t report an incident?
Situations Requiring Incident Reports

Incident reports are written to describe a variety of accidents, medication or treatment errors or omissions, and problems in the environment influencing clients, visitors, or health professionals and/or loss of or damage to property. Among the most frequent accidents that occur in health care delivery settings are falls, for example, from beds, out of wheelchairs, in bathrooms, in corridors, on wet floors, against doors or furniture, or over obstacles on the floor. Sometimes clients may become entangled in their intravenous or genitourinary tubing. They may also cut themselves with or on agency equipment or they may release their safety restraints, thus allowing themselves to fall. An error in a client’s medication(s) or treatment also requires the nurse to submit a report. Any mishap involving the client should be considered an incident and hence should be reported, even if there is no apparent injury.

Similar problems may arise for visitors, and it is as important for the nurse to record these as it is to document what happens to clients. Sometimes, visitors disturb the client or those around him; clients may quarrel with visitors; they may fight with each other or with visitors. These interactions, too, are grounds for filing an incident report as well as notifying security forces. Individuals other than visitors may also be injured. In this group are the private duty nurses, sitters, delivery men, and members of the clergy.

Incident reports are also completed for employee injuries. Health professionals are obligated to notify the administration in writing if their insurance benefits are to remain in force. Any trauma or occurrence that could result in injury to the employee while in the health care setting should be reported. Falls, strains from lifting clients, and wounds from working with equipment constitute valid occurrences to be recorded in an incident report.


Reading for detail

- **What is it?**
  When you want to be certain that you fully comprehend the author, you need to read more slowly and carefully. It’s best to do this after you’ve read in a more general way (surveying, then skimming a couple of times, increasing the depth with each skim). This is probably what most readers attempt at a first reading, if they’re not aware of how useful the skimming process is.
• **How is it useful?**

Reading for detail allows you to understand the logic and details of an explanation or argument and to see more clearly how the ideas are interconnected. You need to do this when you analyse and evaluate information for assignments.

Detailed reading can help you to remember specific points, such as when you want to discuss something later in a tute or class, or to ask a teacher or lecturer about the particular aspect of a text. This is also how we read instructions for carrying out procedures and experiments and how we should read instructions for assignments and questions in exams.

• **How do I do it?**

  - Read for general meaning first and mark passages that need more detailed reading.
  - Number the main points in the text or in your notes to show the development of ideas more clearly, highlighting main and subordinate ideas.
  - Relate sections of the text together focusing on relationships between ideas such as cause/effect, problem/solution, contrast/comparison.
  - Pay close attention to the exact meaning of words and how the author uses them to convey meaning. Also, take notice of words that you might skim over in more general reading.
  - Record what you’ve read in a variety of ways using a note-taking method that works well for you (see Learning Links – Note-taking)
  - Also note your comments and reactions.
  - Re-read as often as you need to.
  - Mentally review to assist recall.

2. Reading Actively

Has this ever happened to you?

You find a spare hour or so, and settle down to read some articles that you need to discuss in your next class. You’re happy because you’re finding it easy to read – nothing too difficult to understand. You get to class the next day, and discussions begin, but **you can’t remember anything you read**, except maybe a couple of points at the beginning or end!

*If this happens to you, what you’ve been doing is reading passively. So what can you do about it? Read actively!*  

To be an active reader we need to:

- **read with understanding**  
- **read with questions**

**Reading with understanding**

Reading with understanding means:

- **being in control** of what you’re reading, and
- looking for **patterns of organisation** in the texts.
Being in control of what you’re reading:

If you’re not asking yourself what you understand and what you don’t yet understand as you read, you could be wasting your time. It’s important to be in control of what you know and what you need to work on. This is called being **metacognitive**.

However, you’re likely to have to read some texts that just don’t make sense to you, so what can you do about it?

Have a go at reading this:

Hegel’s objections to Kant’s handling of the “true a priori” is that the latter’s reduction of this a priori to the pure formal unity of the I think not only robs the true a priori of its character as an original, synthetic unity, but also fixes the formal Ego in an opposition with an always unfathomable beyond.


Even though you’re likely to understand most of the words in this text, unless you’ve studied philosophy, the text itself probably makes no sense to you.

Here are some key words or concepts you would need to understand and some strategies you would need to take:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words in the text</th>
<th>What you need to do to make sense of it:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hegel</td>
<td>Understand some of his basic ideas first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>Understand some of his basic ideas first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>true a priori</td>
<td>Find out what an ‘a priori’ is first before you understand a ‘true a priori’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a priori</td>
<td>Because they talk about a ‘true a priori’, this is probably a fairly common philosophical term that you’ll find in a specialist dictionary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pure formal unity</td>
<td>Perhaps look for the meaning of ‘formal unity’ first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>If this had been in quote marks, it would have been easier to understand. It’s used as a concept, not as an action, such as, for example, ‘I think this is too difficult’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synthetic unity</td>
<td>synthetic = man-made unity = bringing together as one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>These obviously have a different meaning as a phrase in the discipline of philosophy. Perhaps ‘synthetic’ means ‘false’? Need to get more information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formal Ego</td>
<td>Need to find out what Ego means before we add the ‘formal’ to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unfathomable beyond</td>
<td>Perhaps this will fall into place when we understand the rest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You can see that you need to get some background information first. There’s likely to be only a few key words or phrases that are preventing you from understanding any text you’re having difficulty with, so write a list of these and find out what they mean. You might find this information:

- in a glossary in the back of your textbook
- in specialist dictionaries (try the reference section of the library)
- in other texts that might give definitions or examples
- by doing a search for the key word/phrase on the Internet

**Looking for patterns of organization**

It’s not enough just to understand the meanings of the key words or phrases. We also need to understand the relationship between these concepts. Information is most often organised in these ways:

- **Cause and effect**
- **Contrast and comparison**
- **Listing**
- **Problem and solution**

**Cause and effect**

There can be one or more causes and one or more effects for each cause.

Example: *The advertising copywrite was not successful because there was too much text.*

**Signal words often used:** because, as, consequently, as a result of.

**Contrast and comparison**

Shows way in which things are alike and ways in which they’re different.

Example: *There are many similarities between Australia and New Zealand, such as beer consumption, sporting interests and general lifestyle. However, there are also differences, such as the indigenous peoples and the level of multiculturalism.*

**Signal words often used:** similarly, like, similar to, as...as..., larger, smaller, more...than..., however, but, on the other hand, although, yet, conversely.

**Listing**

The items in a list can usually be placed in any order without altering the meaning (excepts those in a time sequence).

Example: *Effective time management depends on a clear understanding of long term and short term goals, and examination of one’s timetable and a list of tasks in priority order.*

**Signal words often used:** next, first, following, previous, latter, finally.

**Problem and solution**

Writers often use this pattern when stating a question and its answer. They can be similar to cause and effect statements but always have a potential answer or solution, rather than just and effect.

Example: *I often have difficulty in getting my assignments in on time, so this semester I’m working on some time management strategies.*

**Signal words often used:** so, therefore, thus.

It’s common to have combinations of these. For instance, in the example of contrast and comparison, listing has also been used. Similarly, it’s common to have a cause, effect and solution in one pattern of organisation.

Example: *Small businesses are facing great problems with in the current down-turn in the economy. One thing the government must do is to provide some tax relief to small business so there will be fewer bankruptcies.*
The organisation of this sentence is: problem, effect, solution.

**Learning Activity**

Quickly read through these paragraphs, then decide what type of organisation is used:

- **Cause and effect**
- **Contrast and comparison**
- **Problem and solution**
- **Listing**
- ... or a combination.

1. **The World Bank and the Environment**
   Although overstaffed, the World Bank does not have the experts it needs to vet and monitor for their environmental effects, the 250 or more new projects it approves each year. However, next month’s meeting of the development committee is likely to recommend the appointment of more environmental specialists – a change that could be fitted into a reorganization that might be completed within the next few months.

2. **Translation by Computer**
   Powerful computers capable of translating documents from one language into another have recently been developed in Japan. The process of machine translation is complex. To translate a document from English into Japanese, for example, the computer first analyzes an English sentence, determining its grammatical structure and identifying the subject, verb, objects, and modifiers. Next, the words are translated by an English-Japanese dictionary. After, that, another part of the computer program analyzes the resulting awkward jumble of words and meanings and produces an intelligible sentence based on the rules of Japanese syntax and the machine’s understanding of what the original English sentence meant. Finally, the computer-produced translation is polished by a human bilingual editor.

3. **Life in Space**
   Living aboard a space station in orbit around the Earth for months at a time poses problems for astronauts’ bodies as well as for their minds. One major problem is maintaining astronaut’s physical health. Medical treatment may be days or even weeks away as there may not be a doctor on board. Illnesses such as appendicitis or ulcers, routinely treated on Earth, could be fatal in space because of the delay in getting to a doctor. Furthermore, surgery may be impossible because blood would float around inside the operating room. Another health problem is the potential for bone deterioration. In a weightless environment, the body produces less calcium. Astronauts would have to exercise at least three hours a day to prevent bone loss.

4. **The Cost of Business Letters**
   The cost of dictating and transcribing the average business letter is $8.64 when the letter is dictated to a live secretary. By comparison, when the same letter is dictated into a machine, the cost of the letter drops to $6.08, according to the Dartnell Institute of Business Research.

5. **The Crime of the Future**
   The increased use of computers in business has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in computer crime. The costs to the victims of computer crime are very high. Parker (1997) stated that “the financial losses to business from computer thefts has now exceed $10 billion. Although Parker’s estimate is based on documented cases, no one really knows the extent of computer crime because thefts using computers are almost impossible to discover.

   Source: Adapted from Oshima, A. & Hogue, A. (1991)

Go to the end to check the answers.
Reading with questions

If you don’t set goals for yourself as you read, you might start drifting off into a day-dream! One of the easiest ways of setting goals is to ask questions before, during and after reading.

Before we get into specific questions, it’s a good idea to think of some general reasons for reading. Here is a range of purposes for reading:

- I want to learn it – to commit it to memory
- I want to get the gist of it – to get a broad overview
- I want to support your argument – to get evidence
- I want to be able to answer an exam question on the topic
- I want to find a range of views on a topic
- I want to locate concrete facts and figures

and one last, but very important reason:

- I want to find out what happens next (don’t forget to get some balance in your life by reading novels and other texts just for fun!)

Other more specific questions you need to ask are:

- Do I need to read this?
- Why am I reading it?
  - Does it contain core material that I should know for assignment work or exams, or is it extension material?
  - Will it help with my assignment topic?
  - Will I need to be able to discuss it in class?
- Do I need to read all of it?
- Where does this text fit in with the rest of my course?
- Has the lecturer referred to it in class?
- What’s the best approach to dealing with this article?

When you get to the actual reading, it helps if you keep these basic questions in mind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What?</th>
<th>When?</th>
<th>Where?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>Who?</td>
<td>How?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It’s useful also to answer the following questions as you read. However, they’re not intended to be something you approach like a comprehension or ‘learn by heart’ exercise. They’re only a guide, and you may find some questions aren’t appropriate for some readings, or you might find you need to add extra questions. Eventually, these types of questions become internalised and you’ll include them automatically as you read.

As you read a section of a book or article, look for information to help you answer:

Questions about the author’s purpose
1. Why has the author written the material?
2. Are these purposes explicitly stated?
3. Are there other implicit purposes?
4. For whom is the material intended?

Questions about the content
1. On which aspects of the topic has the author chosen to concentrate and which to omit?
2. Is the material presented in breadth or depth?
3. What is the main argument or theme in the material?
4. What explanation or evidence is used to support these main points?
5. What are the author’s underlying assumptions? Are these explicitly stated?
6. Has a contemporary issue or a particular philosophy influenced the author’s purpose?
7. Is the author defending a particular point of view?
8. Is there any evidence of deliberate bias, such as choice of sources or interpretation of material?
9. Do the facts seem correct?
10. Is any irrelevant material included?
11. Does any graphic material illustrate or restate the written content?
12. Which of your questions about the subject does the author answer?
13. How are the contents related to what you know about the topic?
14. Do any items puzzle or intrigue you?

Questions about the structure
1. How does the author introduce the subject?
2. What framework is used to organize the material? Is the framework clearly explained?
3. How is the content organized and developed within the framework?
4. Does the author recapitulate what has been said at appropriate points?
5. Are there summaries at the ends of each chapter?
6. Are there exercises throughout that might help you to understand the material?
7. How does the conclusion relate to the introduction and to the rest of the material?

Questions about the style and format
1. In what style has the material been written? For example, is it formal or informal, simple or complex, persuasive, narrative or analytical?
2. How does the style and format influence your reaction to the material?

Answers to the learning activity:

1. Problem and solution
2. Listing
3. Listing (although there are many problems, there are no solutions)
4. Contrast and comparison
5. Cause and effect
3. Reading Textbooks

Textbooks can be difficult to read because there’s a lot of information crammed into each page. However, there are steps you can take to help you read, understand and retain the information.

- First, you need to get an overview of the textbook.
  - **Skim through the contents page**, identifying the chapters that are likely to be useful to you. In many cases you’ll only need to deal with certain chapters.
  - **Read any general introduction to the book**. This often has summaries of the main ideas in each chapter, which will help you when you read the chapter later.

- Once you know which chapter you’re beginning with, you need to get an overview of it. The more you know about what you're reading, the easier it will be to process it into your long-term memory.
  - **Ask yourself what you already know about the topics covered** in the chapter.
  - Also ask yourself **how this material fits into your course**.
  - **Survey what you are about to read** by looking at headings, subheadings, and any charts, graphs or pictures.
  - **Read the introduction** for any summary information about the chapter.

- **study the review questions** if provided.

- **Read one paragraph at a time**, and before you begin to read that paragraph look for a reason to read the paragraph. Use clues such as the heading or topic sentence. **Do not mark as you read.**

- When you finish the paragraph, **ask yourself a question about it**. Write the question in the margin of your textbook.

- **Now mark the answer to the question** by underlining, numbering, boxing, circling, etc. (only if it’s your book, of course!)

- **Cover the text and asking yourself the question written in the margin**. This will help to put the information into your long-term memory.

- **Recite the answer in your own words**.

- Now go on to the next paragraph and continue the process.

It may take you longer to read a chapter this way, but there are many advantages:

- You can read it a bit at a time and take advantage of short periods of time you usually waste or didn't have time for a whole chapter. For instance, you could do one or two paragraphs in the train or bus when traveling to and from uni.

- You (almost) never have to re-read the chapter.
- You know possible test questions in advance.
- You have a systematic way to study your textbook.
- You’re more likely to stay awake!

These materials were produced by the RMIT University Study and Learning Centre.