

2.02 Reading techniques

The ability to read is as important today as it ever was. Some people believe that the need for good basic skills has lessened as technology has improved, that television, with all its power and indeed its role in providing information, has reduced the need for reading. Certainly there are many people who don't buy books for pleasure and enjoyment, and some who rarely read a newspaper or visit a library.

In some ways this may not really matter. Being able to read fluently is very different from wanting to read at all. In so many aspects of our life we still need to read, a need technology cannot replace. Indeed, in some ways it makes it more essential. As more everyday activities become automated, so reading becomes more important.

How to Read Your Textbook More Efficiently

PREVIEW - READ - RECALL at first glance seems to be an intricate and time consuming process. However, it gets easier and faster with practice, ensures thorough learning and facilitates later "re-learning" when you revise for exams. Give it a try!

Preview

Why? If you give your mind a general framework of main ideas and structure, you will be better able to comprehend and retain the details you will read later.

How?

1. Look quickly (10 minutes) over the following key parts of your textbook to see what it's all about and how it is organized:

- Title
- Front and back cover info.
- Author's biographical data
- Publication date
- Table of Contents
- Introduction or Preface
- Index
- Glossary

2. Before you read each chapter, look over:

- Title
- Introduction
- Sub-headings
- First sentences of each paragraph (should give main idea).

- Any diagrams, charts, etc.
- Conclusions or summaries

3. Then answer the following questions:

- What is this mainly about?
- How is it organized?
- How difficult is it?
- About how long will it take to read?

Read actively

Why? Being an active reader will involve you in understanding the material, combat boredom, and will increase retention.

How?

1. Set realistic time goals and number of pages to be read.
2. Divide your chapter into small (1/2 page? 1 column?) sections, rather than trying to read the whole chapter non-stop.
3. Ask yourself a question before each paragraph or section, then look for its answer. This will give you a definite purpose for your reading. Try turning the sub-heading or first sentence into question form, using "who," "what," "when," or "how" if necessary.
4. Take breaks when you feel unable to stay with the material due to day-dreaming, drowsiness, boredom, hunger, etc. After a short break, you can return to your reading with more energy and alertness.

Recall

Why? Research shows that 40 - 50% of the material we read is forgotten very shortly (about 15 minutes) after we read it. Immediate recall is an essential first step toward continued retention of the material.

How? After reading each small section of material, choose one (or more) of the following methods:

1. Recall mentally or recite orally the highlights of what you have read.
2. Ask yourself questions (maybe the same ones you used before you read the section) and answer them in your own words.
3. Underline and make notes in the margin of the key words or phrases in the section. Underlining after you read is the best way to decide what's the most important information to remember.

4. Make separate notes or outlines of what you have read. This technique often works for more technical material which you need to put into your own words.
5. Recall with a friend. What you don't recall, he/she might.

(adapted from The UT Learning Center, University of Texas at Austin, How to read your textbook more efficiently, available from www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/handouts/1422.html)

Other techniques

As you become more confident in your reading, you can learn to apply a range of techniques in order to extract from texts the information you need.

You need to understand that it is not necessary to read every word to obtain meaning from a text or to locate information. You need to practise the following techniques:

1. **Skimming** - reading quickly in order to find out what the text is about. Skimming can also take in features such as headings, subheadings and illustrations to obtain an overview of the subject matter.
2. **Scanning** - to locate specific information, making use of key words.
3. **Detailed reading** - reading carefully to aid understanding. When reading for information, detailed reading usually follows scanning. Some texts, such as instructions, need to be read in detail throughout.

Think about the following questions as you read:

- What is it for?
- Where is it coming from?
- Who is it aimed at?
- What can I infer that isn't explicitly stated?
- Do I believe it?

An understanding of the concept of person and the writer's voice can be developed alongside decoding and in relation to different text types:

- Do I know who the writer is?
- Does it matter?
- Is the writer the same person as the narrator?
- Is the writer a named individual or a representative of an organisation/body/authority?
- Is the writer assuming a 'voice' for the occasion?

In continuous texts, you can try to distinguish:

- main points from supporting detail
- facts from opinions
- conflicting viewpoints
- evidence of simplification, generalisation, manipulation, bias.

(Adapted from:

www.dfes.gov.uk/curriculum_literacy/tree/reading/readingcomp/guidance/2/)