The trouble with reading

Starting out: skimming

Work out how the text you’re reading is organised:

• Skim the abstract, contents list, introduction, chapter/section headings, conclusion – and then the topic sentences (usually the first sentence of each paragraph).

• Consider closely the title in relation to the introduction. Locate the writer’s argument in the introduction: what is he/she going to try and persuade you to believe/think?

• Locate the writer’s argument in the introduction – and trace it through the text.

• Consider the conclusion closely – what does the writer think he/she has persuaded you to think? Trace his/her argument and reasoning back through the text.

Reading closely

You’ll probably need to read texts more than once – even if you’re a native English speaker. Words, knowledge, arguments, theories and concepts, etc, may be new and it may take time to extract meaning.

Focus on ideas, argument, application and meaning – not on words. If the text is hard to understand, consider whether it’s because:

• I lack background knowledge? (Strategy: eg, read other articles on the topic to develop background knowledge; discuss with colleagues; discuss with tutor/lecturer/supervisor)

• I lack sufficient vocabulary? (Strategy: eg, actively develop your vocabulary, especially your discipline-specific vocabulary – learn and use new words every day)

• I’m just not interested in this subject/topic? (Strategy: eg, consider how to overcome motivation blocks; re-think/re-kindled your interest in the course/topic; discuss with tutor/lecturer/supervisor.)

Or

• the writer is writing for a highly informed and specialised audience? Recognise that it is not necessarily you who has the problem here (Strategy: eg, locate other, better writers on the topic; discuss with colleagues; discuss with tutor/lecturer/supervisor)

• the writer is just a poor writer? (Strategy: eg, read other writers on/around the topic.)

Reading selectively and actively

• Have a research question in mind before you begin to read (eg, tutorial/seminar questions; research essay question). This will help you select those parts of the text that are most relevant to your purpose.

• Annotate the text with questions and notes which explain your response to the text:
  — Smith argues that... and this is important because... . Flawed argument because...

Highlighting/underlining is passive – you may forget why you highlighted and underlined.

• Read for forty minutes – then test yourself for ten minutes on what you have learnt. Discuss your reading with a colleague – articulating what you think/how you respond consolidates what you know.
Speed reading?

Be cautious – you can do speed reading courses, but they will not necessarily help you to understand fully what you have read. What is important is that you comprehend what you read – but at the same time keep up with the required readings.

1. Have a purpose/question in mind (eg, a research or a tutorial question).
2. Read once for an overview – how is the text organised?
3. Read again to locate relevant material.
4. Read closely that which is relevant, paying close attention to signals from the writer.
5. Discuss what you read – with colleagues; with lecturers/tutors/supervisors.

More information?

• Visit the Academic Skills and Learning Centre website, and browse our resources on reading: academicskills.anu.edu.au