

## **SKIMMING & SCANNING**

Skimming and scanning are reading techniques that use rapid eye movement and keywords to move quickly through text for slightly different purposes. Skimming is reading rapidly in order to get a general overview of the material. Scanning is reading rapidly in order to find specific facts. While skimming tells you what general information is within a section, scanning helps you locate a particular fact. Skimming is like snorkeling, and scanning is more like pearl diving.

Use skimming in previewing (reading before you read), reviewing (reading after you read), determining the main idea from a long selection you don't wish to read, or when trying to find source material for a research paper.

Use scanning in research to find particular facts, to study fact-heavy topics, and to answer questions requiring factual support.

### **Skimming to save time**

Skimming can save you hours of laborious reading. However, it is not always the most appropriate way to read. It is very useful as a preview to a more detailed reading or when reviewing a selection heavy in content. But when you skim, you may miss important points or overlook the finer shadings of meaning, for which rapid reading or perhaps even study reading may be necessary.

Use skimming to overview your textbook chapters or to review for a test. Use skimming to decide if you need to read something at all, for example during the preliminary research for a paper. Skimming can tell you enough about the general idea and tone of the material, as well as its gross similarity or difference from other sources, to know if you need to read it at all.

To skim, prepare yourself to move rapidly through the pages. You will not read every word; you will pay special attention to typographical cues-headings, boldface and italic type, indenting, bulleted and numbered lists. You will be alert for key words and phrases, the names of people and places, dates, nouns, and unfamiliar words. In general follow these steps:

1. Read the *table of contents* or *chapter overview* to learn the main divisions of ideas.

2. Glance through the main headings in each chapter just to see a word or two. Read the *headings of charts and tables*.
3. Read the entire *introductory paragraph* and then the *first and last sentence* only of each following paragraph. For each paragraph, read only the first few words of each sentence or to locate the main idea.
4. Stop and quickly read the sentences containing *keywords* indicated in boldface or italics.
5. When you think you have found something significant, stop to read the entire sentence to make sure. Then go on the same way. Resist the temptation to stop to read details you don't need.
6. Read *chapter summaries* when provided.

If you cannot complete all the steps above, compromise: read only the chapter overviews and summaries, for example, or the summaries and all the boldfaced keywords. When you skim, you take a calculated risk that you may miss something. For instance, the main ideas of paragraphs are not always found in the first or last sentences (although in many textbooks they are). Ideas you miss you may pick up in a chapter overview or summary.

Good skimmers do not skim everything at the same rate or give equal attention to everything. While skimming is always faster than your normal reading speed, you should slow down in the following situations:

- When you skim introductory and concluding paragraphs
- When you skim topic sentences
- When you find an unfamiliar word
- When the material is very complicated

### **Scanning for research and study**

Scanning, too, uses keywords and organizational cues. But while the goal of skimming is a bird's-eye view of the material, the goal of scanning is to locate and swoop down on particular facts.

Facts may be buried within long text passages that have relatively little else to do with your topic or claim. Skim this material first to decide if it is likely to contain the facts you need. Don't forget to scan tables of contents, summaries, indexes, headings, and typographical cues. To make sense of lists and tables, skim them

first to understand how they are organized: alphabetical, chronological, or most-to-least, for example. If after skimming you decide the material will be useful, go ahead and scan:

1. Know what you're looking for. Decide on a few key words or phrases—search terms, if you will. You will be a flesh-and-blood search engine.
2. Look for only one keyword at a time. If you use multiple keywords, do multiple scans.
3. Let your eyes float rapidly down the page until you find the word or phrase you want.
4. When your eye catches one of your keywords, read the surrounding material carefully.

### **Scanning to answer questions**

if you are scanning for facts to answer a specific question, one step is already done for you: the question itself supplies the keywords. Follow these steps:

1. Read each question completely before starting to scan. Choose your keywords from the question itself.
  2. Look for answers to only one question at a time. Scan separately for each question.
  3. When you locate a keyword, read the surrounding text carefully to see if it is relevant.
  4. Re-read the question to determine if the answer you found answers this question.
- Scanning is a technique that requires concentration and can be surprisingly tiring. You may have to practice at not allowing your attention to wander. Choose a time and place that you know works for you and dive in.

### **What Is Skimming?**

Skimming is one of the tools you can use to read more in less time.

**Skimming** refers to looking *only* for the general or main ideas, and works best with non-fiction (or factual) material.

Skimming takes place while reading and allows you to look for details in addition to the main ideas.

Many people think that skimming is a haphazard process placing the eyes where ever they fall.

However, to skim effectively, there has to be a structure but you don't read everything.

*What you read is more important than what you leave out.*

So what material do you read and what material do you leave out?

Let's say you are doing research on a long chapter or a web site.

By reading the first few paragraphs in detail, you will get a good idea of what information will be discussed.

Once you know where the reading is headed, you can begin to **read only the first sentence of each paragraph.**

Also called *topic sentences*, they give you the main idea of the paragraph.

If you do not get the main idea in the topic sentence or if the paragraph greatly interests you, then you may want to skim more.

At the end of each topic sentence, your eyes should drop down through the rest of the paragraph, looking for important pieces of information, such as names, dates, or events.

Continue to read only topic sentences, dropping down through the rest of the paragraphs, until you are near the end.

Since the last few paragraphs may contain a conclusion or summary, you should stop skimming there and read in detail.

Remember that your overall comprehension will be lower than if you read in detail. If while skimming, you feel you are grasping the main ideas, then you are skimming correctly.

Suppose you are taking a presentation skills class and have to deliver an oral report in a few days about the first computers ever made. You locate six books and four newspaper articles about this topic.

Because you must be ready soon, you do not have time to read each word, but you need a large quantity of solid information.

Skimming will help you locate the information quickly while making sure you use your time wisely. It will also increase the amount of usable material you obtain for your research.

Suppose you have an exam in a few days. You need to review the material you learned, but you don't want to reread everything.

By skimming, you can quickly locate the information you haven't mastered yet and study only that material.

While reading, ask yourself the following questions to help you decide whether or not to skim.

If you answer yes to any of these, then skimming is a useful tool.

Is this material non-fiction?

Do I have a lot to read and only a small amount of time?

Do I already know something about this?

Can any of the material be skipped?

If you have sufficient background knowledge or believe you don't need the information, then skip it!

That's right—don't read it at all! Believe it or not, skipping material may sometimes be the best use of your time.

Just because someone wrote something doesn't mean you have to read it.

*If you pick and choose carefully what you skim and skip, you will be pleasantly surprised at the large amount of information you can get through in a short period of time.*

### **What Is Scanning?**

Scanning is another useful tool for speeding up your reading. Unlike skimming, when **scanning**, you look *only* for a specific fact or piece of information without reading everything.

You scan when you look for your favorite show listed in the cable guide, for your friend's phone number in a telephone book, and for the sports scores in the newspaper.

For scanning to be successful, you need to understand how your material is structured as well as comprehend what you read so you can locate the specific information you need.

Scanning also allows you to find details and other information in a hurry.

### **How to Scan**

Because you already scan many different types of material in your daily life, learning more details about scanning will be easy.

Establishing your purpose, locating the appropriate material, and knowing how the information is structured before you start scanning is essential.

The material you scan is typically arranged in the following ways: alphabetically, chronologically, non-alphabetically, by category, or textually.

**Alphabetical** information is arranged in order from A to Z,

while **chronological** information is arranged in time or numerical order.

Information can also be arranged in **non- alphabetical** order, such as a television listing, or by **category**, listings of like items such as an auto parts catalog.

Sometimes information is located within the written paragraphs of text, also known as a **textual** sense, as in an encyclopedia entry.

Learning to use your hands while scanning is very helpful in locating specific information.

Do you do anything with your hands to locate a word in a dictionary?

To find a meeting time on your calendar? To read a train or bus schedule?

Using your hand or finger is extremely helpful in focusing your attention and keeping your place while scanning a column of material.

Your peripheral vision can also help you scan effectively.

When your hand moves down a list of names, you see not only the name your finger is pointing to, but also the names above and below.

Let your eyes work for you when searching for information.

Keep the concept of key words in mind while scanning.

Your purpose will determine the key words. Suppose you are looking for the time a train leaves from New York City for Washington, D.C.

The key words to keep in mind are “from New York City” and “to Washington D.C.” If you are looking for the cost of a computer printer with the code number PX-710, the key word to locate in a list of many printers is “PX-710.”

When to scan?

You scan when your aim is to find specific pieces of information.

If you were doing the research for an oral presentation, you could scan the index of books, web sites, and reference materials. You would discover whether they contain any information you want and the pages where the information can be found.

In the past, you probably scanned without knowing you were doing it. Now with the information provided in this section, you can use scanning more intentionally and frequently.

The more you practice, the more effective scanning will become.

Finally, the most important benefit of scanning is its ability to help you become a more flexible reader. Scanning adds another high gear to your reading.

Because you may be used to reading every word and may be uncomfortable leaving some words out, you need to give yourself permission to overlook some words by skimming, scanning, and skipping material according to your reading purpose.

I give you permission to NOT read everything!

### **Let's skim the first and last sentences from the passage.**

In recent years, evidence has been collected which suggests that the proportion of British children and teenagers who are unhappy is higher than in many other developed countries around the world. For example, a recently published report set out to measure 'well-being' among young people in nineteen European countries, found that the United Kingdom came bottom. The report was based on statistics and surveys in which young people answered questions on a wide range of subject. The United Kingdom is a relatively unequal country with a relatively high proportion of young people living in households. With less than half the national average income. This seems to have a negative effect on how they feel about themselves.

So what's our answer?—

Choose the heading that best matches the previous paragraph.

- a. Parents are to blame for the state of children today
- b. A report with many conclusions and worries about the United Kingdom
- c. Growing up unhappy generation
- d. There are so many social problems young people face today