

Module: RT

Level: 1st Year

Teacher: Mrs. T. Bekakra

Comprehension Skills: Previewing, Skimming, and Scanning

Comprehending what you read is more than just recognizing and understanding words. True comprehension means making sense of what you read and connecting the ideas in the text to what you already know. It also means remembering what you have read. In other words, comprehending means thinking while you read.

1- Previewing:

• Previewing an Article or an Essay

In previewing an article or essay, you look at most of the first paragraph, the first sentence of each paragraph, and the concluding sentences. You should ask yourself questions like the ones below.

Previewing questions for an article or essay

- What is it about? What is the title? What do I already know about this?
- What kind of text is this? Is it a description? An explanation? An argument? A narrative (history)?
- Is the text divided into parts? How is it organized?
- Are there any maps, numbers, italicized words, or names in the text?

EXERCISE 1

A. Preview this essay by quickly, reading only the underlined parts. After previewing, answer the questions that follow. Your teacher will time you or you can time yourself for one minute.

How Dictionaries Are Made

by S. I. Hayakawa

It is widely believed that every word has a correct meaning that we learn these meanings principally from teachers and grammarians (except that most of the time we don't bother to, so that we ordinarily speak "sloppy English"), and that dictionaries and grammars are the supreme authority in matters of meaning and usage. [...] Few people ask by what authority the writers of dictionaries and grammars say what they say.

Let us see how dictionaries are made and how the editors arrive at definitions. What follows applies, incidentally, only to those dictionary offices where first-hand, original research goes on—not those in which editors simply copy existing dictionaries. The task of writing a dictionary begins with the reading of vast amounts of the literature of the period or subject that the dictionary is to cover. As the editors read, they copy on cards every interesting or rare word, every unusual or peculiar occurrence of a common word, a large number of common words in their ordinary uses, and also the sentences in which each of these words appears, thus:

pail

The dairy pails bring home increase of milk

Keats, Endymion 1, 44-45

That is to say, the context of each word is collected, along with the word itself. For a really big job of dictionary writing, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (usually bound in about twenty-five volumes) millions of such cards are collected, and the task of editing occupies

decades. As the cards are collected, they are alphabetized and sorted. When the sorting is completed, there will be for each word anywhere from two to three to several hundred illustrative quotations, each on its card.

To define a word, then, the dictionary editor places before him the stack of cards illustrating that word: each of the cards represents an actual use of the word by a writer of some literary or historical importance. He reads the cards carefully, discards some, rereads the rest, and divides up the stack according to what he thinks are the several senses of the word. Finally, he writes his definitions, following the hard-and-fast rule that each definition *must* be based on what the quotations in front of him reveal about the meaning of the word. The editor cannot be influenced by what *he* thinks a given word *ought* to mean. He must work according to the cards or not at all.

The writing of a dictionary, therefore, is not a task of setting up authoritative statements about the "true meanings" of words, but a task of *recording*, to the best of one's ability, what various words have meant to authors in the distant or immediate past. *The writer of a dictionary is a historian, not a lawgiver.* [...] To regard the dictionary as an "authority," therefore, is to credit the dictionary writer with gifts of prophecy which neither he nor anyone else possesses. In choosing our words when we speak or write, we can be *guided* by the historical record afforded us by the dictionary, but we cannot be *bound* by it, because new situations, new experiences, new inventions, new feelings, are always compelling us to give new uses to old words. Looking under a "hood," we should ordinarily have found, five hundred years ago, a monk; today, we find a motorcar engine.

(Source: S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 2nd Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1939)

B. Answer the following questions without looking back at the essay. Notice how much you are able to remember from just one minute of previewing!

1. What is this essay about?
2. What kind of text is this (i.e., description, explanation, argument, narrative)?
3. Where do dictionary meanings come from?
4. What is the role of a dictionary writer?
5. Do words keep the same meaning forever?
6. Write any words, phrases, or numbers you noticed.

*** Previewing a Textbook**

Previewing is especially important in textbooks. You should always read the table of contents and the outline of a chapter to find out what they contain. You should also preview the text in a chapter or a section of a chapter before reading it.

EXERCISE 2

A. Read the table of contents from a sociology textbook. Then answer the questions that follow.

Society: The Basics

Brief Contents

- 1 Sociology: Perspective, Theory, and Method 1
- 2 Culture 29
- 3 Socialization 57
- 4 Social Interaction in Everyday Life 81
- 5 Groups and Organizations 103
- 6 Sexuality and Society 127
- 7 Deviance 155
- 8 Social Stratification 189
- 9 Global Stratification 213
- 10 Gender Stratification 239

11 Race and Ethnicity	265
12 The Economy and Politics	299
13 Family and Religion	333
14 Education and Medicine	365
15 Population, Urbanization, and the Environment	389
16 Social Change: Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern Societies	411
Glossary	434
Name Index	467
Subject Index	472

(Source: J. J. Macionis, *Society: The Basics*, 4th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998)

1. How many chapters does this book contain?
2. Which topics are not familiar to you?
3. Which chapters do you think would be most interesting to read?
4. Besides chapters, what other sections are listed?

*** Guidelines for previewing a textbook passage**

- Read the main heading.
- Check to see if the passage is divided into parts.
- Read the first few sentences.
- Read the first sentence of each paragraph after that.
- Read the final sentences of the passage.

EXERCISE 3

Preview the following passage from Chapter 3 of Society: The Basics for one minute. Then answer the questions that follow.

Introduction: The Importance of Social Experience

On a cold winter day in 1938, a concerned social worker walked anxiously to the door of a rural Pennsylvania farmhouse. Investigating a case of possible child abuse, the social worker soon discovered a five-year-old girl hidden in a second-floor storage room. The child, whose name was Anna, was wedged into an old chair with her arms tied above her head so she could not move. She was wearing filthy garments, and her arms and legs were as thin as matchsticks.

Anna's situation can only be described as tragic. She was born in 1932 to an unmarried mentally impaired woman of twenty-six who lived with her father. Enraged by his daughter's "illegitimate" motherhood, the grandfather did not even want the child in his home. Anna, therefore, spent the early months of her life in the custody of various welfare agencies. But her mother was unable to pay for this care, so Anna returned to the home where she was not wanted. Because of her grandfather's hostility and her mother's indifference, Anna lived alone in a room where she received little attention and just enough milk to keep her alive. There she stayed—day after day, month after month, with virtually no human contact—for five years.

Upon learning of the discovery of Anna, sociologist Kingsley Davis traveled immediately to see the child. He found her in a county home, where local authorities had taken her. Davis was appalled by the sight of the emaciated child, who could not laugh, speak, or even smile. Anna was completely apathetic, as if alone in an empty world.

(Source: J. J. Macionis, *Society: The Basics*, 4th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998)

B. Answer the following questions without looking back at the passage.

1. What is the section about?
2. Have you ever heard or read about other children like Anna?
3. Is this part of the chapter divided into parts?
4. Do you think this chapter would be difficult to read and understand?

5. What words, phrases, or numbers do you remember from previewing the passage?

2- 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

2- **Scanning For Study and Research:**

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.

References:

Mikulecky, Beatrice S., and Linda Jeffries. *Advanced Reading Power*. Pearson

Education, 2007.

Butte College. *TIP sheet: Skimming and Scanning*.

https://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/readingstrategies/skimming_scanning.html