

Choosing a Reading Strategy

You don't drive your car at the same speed under all weather and road conditions, and you shouldn't read that way, either. Depending on where we're going and what's going on around us, we drive slower or faster. Similarly, depending on our purpose and environment, we should *read* slower or faster. No matter what speed we read, though, *passive reading* decreases comprehension and *active reading* increases it.

No to passive reading

Passive readers allow the author to do their thinking for them; they are just along for the ride. They daydream and have trouble concentrating. They might fail to notice the overall organization of the material. Passive readers don't know *why* they are reading, or how it connects to other things they're learning, or why they should care. They end up with a hazy understanding of what they have read and forget much of it a short time later.

For passive readers, slow reading can actually interfere with understanding because their thoughts do *not* slow down—they just have more time to wander. The key to comprehension is active reading.

Yes to active reading

Active readers do not read everything at the same speed. Active readers slow down for difficult parts or when their surroundings are distracting, but when the reading is easy or the material familiar, they speed up, or *skim*.

Active readers "talk back" to the author in their minds and compare the author's ideas to things they have heard or read elsewhere. They don't just underline or highlight—they write in their margins: a smiley means they like something, for example; a question mark means "Huh?" or "Really?" An * or ! shows importance or surprise. They make lists in the margins and summarize main points or important details.

Skimming gives a bird's-eye view

Skimming is one active reading strategy. When you skim, you do not read every single word. Instead, your eye moves along quickly, glancing at groups of words or whole lines at once. The purpose of skimming is to get a bird's-eye view of the material. A textbook, after all, is not an Agatha Christie murder mystery: you can look ahead. In fact, you *should* look ahead.

- To preview a book, flip back and forth through the pages while skimming headings, captions, and the beginnings of paragraphs: How long is it? Are there a lot of pictures, graphs, and tables?
- Look at the table of contents in the front and read the chapter titles. What, in general, is this book about?
- Look at the back of the book. Is there an index? A glossary? Extra readings or other appendices?
- Flip through a chapter: how long is it? What do the tables, graphs, or pictures mean?
- Read chapter headings, all the bold words, and the study questions, if any (you don't have to answer them now—just read them).
- Is there a chapter summary at the beginning or end? Read it.
- Tell yourself, in one or two sentences, what this chapter seems to be about.

- Skim a library book or article to decide if it is suitable for a research paper—don't waste time with close reading until you have reason to believe you'll be able to use it.

Scanning locates facts

Scanning is another active reading technique. Scanning is used to locate specific facts, for example in research and in-depth studying—you become a flesh-and-blood search engine. Scanning requires you to move in a disciplined way through text, looking for specific keywords. To scan, zig-zag smoothly down the page with a finger or pencil, following it with your eyes and searching for the keyword. When you find the keyword, slow down and read the surrounding material. You may have to practice concentrating and resist the impulse to stray.

- Scanning saves you time when you research because facts you *can* use are sometimes buried within long passages that you *can't* use. You can skim the material first to decide if it is likely to contain the facts you need, and then scan to locate the facts you need.
- Use scanning to study for tests and to answer study questions; the keywords come from the study questions, from the chapter headings, or from the chapter vocabulary list.

Study reading combines strategies

When you read for the purpose of retaining a lot of information over the long term you can combine active reading strategies:

- Preview and skim the chapter to get your brain thinking about the subject and to get an idea about the main topics and vocabulary. Previewing activates prior knowledge and associations you already have about the subject. You will understand and remember more if you preview before reading.
- Active close reading allows you to follow the author's thought development. Mark up margins with questions (or make notes in a notebook if you can't bring yourself to write in your books). You will probably understand and remember more if you make notes because the process of understanding, condensing, and writing is *active*.
- Active slow reading gets you through the hardest parts of the chapter. Active faster reading or skimming gets you through the easier sections.
- Stop to decode graphs, charts, and tables and relate them to what you've read so far. This reinforces those ideas and increases the number of associations you have for the information. The more associations you have, the more pathways are open to you to retrieve (remember) the information later.
- Taking breaks helps you remember what you've read because you tend to remember mostly what you learned at the beginning and at the end of a study session—the middle fades away. If you read in 20- or 30-minute blocks instead of a solid two hours, you will have more beginnings and endings—and less in the middle to forget!
- Stop and backtrack while reading to scan for terms or definitions you've missed. Scan to find the answers to study questions before a test.

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