Improving your reading skills

Study guide

Improving your reading skills will reduce unnecessary reading time and enable you to read in a more focused and selective manner. You will also be able to increase your levels of understanding and concentration. This guide shows you how to read with greater efficiency and effectiveness by using a range of different reading skills.

Reading for study

You already use a range of reading styles in everyday situations. The normal reading style that you might use for reading a novel is to read in detail, focusing on every word in sequence from start to finish. If it is a magazine you are reading, you might flick through the pages to see which articles are of interest. When you look in a telephone directory for a particular name, you purposefully ignore all other entries and focus your attention on spotting the name you want. These everyday reading skills can be applied to your studies.

To improve your reading skills you need to:

- have clear reading goals;
- choose the right texts;
- use the right reading style;
- use note taking techniques.

Reading goals

Clear reading goals can significantly increase your reading efficiency. Not everything in print will be of use to you. Use reading goals to select and prioritise information according to the task in hand.

Reading goals can be:

- an essay or seminar subject;

- a report brief;
- a selected subject area;
- a series of questions about a specific topic.

Use your reading goals to help you identify the information that is relevant to your current task.

Choosing a text

You will need to assess the text to see if it contains information that is relevant to your reading goals.

- Check the date of publication. Is the information up-to-date?
- Read the publisher's blurb at the back or inside sleeve for an overview of the content.
- Check the contents page for relevant chapters.
- Look up references for your topic in the index.

If the text does not seem relevant, discard it.

Once you have selected a text you can use the following techniques of scanning and skimming to help you identify areas for detailed reading.

Scanning

Scanning is the technique you might use when reading a telephone directory. You pass your vision speedily over a section of text in order to find particular words or phrases that are relevant to your current task. You can scan:

- the introduction or preface of a text;
- the first or last paragraphs of chapters;
- the concluding or summarising chapter of a text;
- the book index.

Skimming

Skimming is the process of speedy reading for general meaning. Let your eyes skip over sentences or phrases which contain detail. Concentrate on identifying the central or main points. Use this technique to:

- pre-view a selection of text prior to detailed reading;
- refresh your understanding of a selection of text following detailed reading.

Detailed reading and note taking

Once you have selected useful information, you can begin to read in detail. Note taking techniques provide a useful aid to reading. Use:

- **underlining and highlighting** to pick out what seem to you the most central or important words and phrases. Do this in your own copy of texts or on photocopies - never on borrowed texts;
- **keywords** to record the main headings as you read. Use one or two keywords for each main point. Keywords can be used when you don't want to mark the text;
- **questions** to encourage you to take an active approach to your reading. Record your questions as you read. They can also be used as prompts for follow up work;
- **summaries** to check you have understood what you have read. Pause after a section of text and put what you have read in your own words. Skim over the text to check the accuracy of your summary, filling in any significant gaps.

These techniques encourage an active engagement with the text as well as providing you with a useful record of your reading. Avoid passively reading large amounts of text, it does not make effective use of your time. Always use a note taking technique to increase your levels of concentration and understanding.

Increasing your reading speed

It is more important to improve your reading skills than your reading speed. Being focused and selective in your reading habits will reduce the time you spend reading. If, in addition to using a range of reading skills you want to increase your reading speed, then the following technique will be of use.

The average reading speed is about 240-300 words per minute. For the average reader, the eye fixes on each word individually.

It is easy for your eye to recognise 4 or 5 words in a single fixation without a loss of understanding.

The key to increasing your reading speed is not to increase the speed at which your eyes move across the page, but to increase the word span for a single fixation. A simple way of developing the habit of taking in more than one word per fixation is to take a page of text and divide it length ways into three with two lines drawn down the page. Using a pen or pencil as a pointer, read each line of text by allowing your eye to fall only in the middle of each of the three sections, as indicated by your pointer.

Developing your reading speed

- Don't worry about how quickly you are reading but instead, concentrate on reading the line in only three fixations.
- As this becomes more natural, practise without drawing lines.
- Later, reduce the number of fixations to two per line.
- Once this increased word span becomes a comfortable habit, an increase in your reading speed will occur.

Summary

- Have a clear focus for your reading. Set your reading goals.
- Survey the text before you spend the time and effort involved in detailed reading.

- Scan and skim to select the text for detailed reading.
- Scan and skim after detailed reading to reinforce your understanding.
- Use a form of note taking whilst reading in detail, to keep you concentrating, aid understanding and provide you with a record of your reading.
- Using clear reading goals and a variety of reading skills is more important than increasing your reading speed.
- To improve your reading speed, don't increase the speed of the eye across the page, but increase the number of words the eye recognises in a single fixation.