Skimming and Scanning: Two Important Strategies for Speeding up Your Reading[*]

Skimming and scanning are two very different strategies for *speed-reading*.

They are each used for different purposes, and they are not meant to be used all the time.

Skimming and scanning are at the fast end of the speed reading range, while studying, without understanding how to speed up your reading is at the slow end.

People who know how to skim and scan are flexible readers.

They read according to their purpose and get the information they need quickly without wasting time.

When using skimming and scanning you do not read every single word which is what increases your reading speed.

Once you understand these two skills, your expertise will lie in knowing what specific information to read and which method to use.

Both will help you in school and in business when you need to learn new material.

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.

You hone in on what is important to your purpose.

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 wherever they fall.

However, to skim effectively, there has to be a structure but you do not read everything.

What Material to Leave Out When Skimming?

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 us 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 do not want to reread everything.

By skimming, you can quickly locate the information you have not mastered yet and study only that material.

Ask Yourself These Questions to Decide if You Want to Use Skimming

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 is right—do not 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 be 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.

Use Your Hands When Scanning

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.

Use Peripheral Vision When Scanning

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.