

Reading to Write: About Skimming and Scanning

Your perceptions of any written text are deepened through familiarity. One of the most effective methods for beginning the kind of thoughtful reading necessary for academic work is to get a general overview of the text before beginning to read it in detail. By first **skimming** a text, you can get a sense of its overall logical progression. Skimming can also help you make decisions about where to place your greatest focus when you have limited time for your reading. Here is one technique for skimming a text. You may need to modify it to suit your own reading style.

- a. First, prior to skimming, use some of the **previewing** techniques.
- b. Then, **read carefully** the **introductory paragraph**, or perhaps the first two paragraphs. Ask yourself what the focus of the text appears to be, and try to **predict** the direction of the coming explanations or arguments.
- c. Read carefully the **first one or two sentences of each paragraph**, as well as the **concluding sentence** or sentences.
- d. In between these opening and closing sentences, **keep your eyes moving** and try to avoid looking up unfamiliar words or terminology. Your goal is to pick up the larger concepts and something of the overall pattern and significance of the text.
- e. **Read carefully** the **concluding paragraph** or paragraphs. What does the author's overall purpose seem to be? Remember that you may be mistaken, so be prepared to modify your answer.
- f. Finally, return to the beginning and **read through the text carefully**, noting the complexities you missed in your skimming and filling in the gaps in your understanding. Think about your purpose in reading this text and what you need to retain from it, and **adjust your focus** accordingly. Look up the terms you need to know, or unfamiliar words that appear **several** times.

Scanning is basically skimming with a more tightly focused purpose: skimming to **locate a particular fact or figure**, or to see whether this text mentions **a subject you're researching**. Scanning is essential in the writing of research papers, when you may need to look through many articles and books in order to find the material you need. Keep a specific set of goals in mind as you scan the text, and avoid becoming distracted by other material. You can note what you'd like to return to later when you do have time to read further, and use scanning to move ahead in your research project.