IMPROVING YOUR READING ABILITY: PURPOSE AND COMPREHENSION SKILLS

Reading is a dynamic integration of skills, combined and recombined for each new reading task. Effective reading involves purpose, comprehension, speed, vocabulary, and vision, as well as background and previous experience.

FINDING PURPOSE IN READING

While reading, you need to have a purpose clearly defined. For example, your purpose might be to fulfill a class assignment, in which case you should know why this particular selection was assigned (the instructor will often make his/her purpose explicit when making an assignment). Perhaps your reading is for a research report. Frequently you may be assigned reading without being told the purpose. Under such circumstances, you can evolve your own purpose and meaning. For example, you might:

1. Decide in advance what you want to secure from the material you are reading. On one occasion you may wish to read for facts and on another for pleasure and recreation.
2. You might want to use the SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review) method. Basically the SQ3R forces you to ask yourself questions concerning the texts and answer them through your reading.
3. Ask yourself, “How does this chapter fit into other things I have read?” This can be followed by asking “What are the new developments contained in this chapter?” and “What new ideas are presented?”
4. Read the material with the idea that you will tell a friend what you have learned.
5. Consider how to relate what is being read to other books and other courses. You might also try to determine how the material relates to your interest or how it might affect your life.

Evaluating the purpose of the author and the significance of his/her work can also add interest and meaning to the reading. This may require an understanding of the author’s point of view as well as organization of materials. The author often expresses his/her purpose in a preface or foreword, and the table of contents sometimes suggests the ways ideas were developed. Skimming and looking at headings and subheadings further suggest the author’s purpose, although it usually takes an actual reading to determine this.

Finding a purpose in reading and being able to evaluate the purpose and the significance of the author’s writings can add personal meaning and a challenge to reading. Reading without purpose can be frustrating and may reduce motivation, comprehension, and efficiency.

COMPREHENSION

College students are required to read so much material that they cannot possibly remember more than a portion of what was read. Once you know what you wish to gain from your reading, you will be able to decide which type of comprehension you want to work toward. Following are descriptions of different types of comprehension skills.

GETTING THE MAIN IDEA

To be able to select the main idea or central thought is one of the most valuable comprehension skills. It requires the ability to extract the most important thought from a mass of ideas and subordinate ideas or illustrative materials. This type of reading is generally used when covering the material for the first time.

In most textbooks, the paragraph is the enlargement of a single main idea. It may describe a Renaissance painting or list the symptoms of rabies. It may argue the merits of teaching machines or explain the seeding of clouds. It may introduce a theme or provide a conclusion. But all of the sentences have a common purpose: the expansion of the central thought. In most instances the main idea most often falls at the beginning of the paragraph; however, this is not true in all cases.

Examples:

I. The towns did not fit into the complex structure of the feudal-manorial system. Townsmen tended to be more "progressive" than the peasants and were apt to be restive under the restraints of feudal life. They needed, if only because of their numbers, a more elaborate and flexible political organization than feudalism afforded. Moreover, once they had town government, they were in a position to raise and maintain their own bodies of soldiers.

   In Paragraph I the main idea is stated in the first sentence: “The towns did not fit into the complex structure of the feudal-manorial system.” Everything else contributes to this idea, giving as reasons the progressiveness of the townspeople, their need for a more elaborate and flexible political organization, and their power to raise and maintain the bodies of soldiers.

II. The townspeople tended to be more "progressive" than the peasants and were apt to be restive under the restraints of feudalism. Because of their numbers, they needed a more elaborate and flexible political organization than feudalism afforded. And once they had town governments, they were in a position to raise and maintain bodies of soldiers. For all these reasons, the towns did not fit in readily with the complex structure of the feudal-manorial system.

   Instead of starting with the main idea and continuing with the details, the paragraph lists one by one the "progressive" nature of the townspeople, their need for a more flexible and elaborate form of government, and their ability to raise and maintain bodies of soldiers. The last sentence concludes with the statement that for all these reasons the towns did not fit in well with the feudal-manorial system. The main idea is stated in the last sentence.
III. The beagle hound is a favorite with children; its gentle nature and extreme patience make it an ideal companion for any younger. Because of its alert intelligence, it is easily trained in manners and tricks. These are a few of the reasons for its rapid rise in popularity in this country. It is not a habitual barker, but it is a good watchdog, and it is inexpensive to feed. It is a good hunter and is equally at home in the city or the country.

The third pattern is often used when a writer wishes to break the monotones of a long list of details. Particularly when the illustrative points are similar in form, there is advantage in giving some of them at the beginning of the paragraph and the rest at the end. The main idea is stated somewhere in the middle.

READ TO NOTE DETAILS OR SIGNIFICANT FACTS

After mastering the basic, important ideas, you have a skeleton on which details will fit. Details should be seen in relation to the main concepts that they help develop, not as a series of isolated bits of information. Details serve numerous functions: They provide concrete examples to make a generalization more meaningful; they provide evidence to support a conclusion; they illustrate ways in which an idea can be applied; and they may also mark the limits of an idea.

- **Illustrate:** These details help to explain the thesis by means of examples. They may be preceded by an indicator such as "for example" or "to illustrate."
- **Define:** These details provide clear, concise, and authoritative meanings differentiating the particular object under discussion from all other objects in that class.
- **Describe:** These details function to recount, characterize, sketch, or relate in narrative form the idea or ideas presented in the thesis.
- **Discuss:** These tend to examine or analyze the thesis very carefully presenting considerations pro and/or the problems or items involved.
- **Explain:** These details make a statement of how or why to reconcile any differences in opinion or experimental results, and a statement of cause. They should also indicate the conditions, which give rise to whatever is being examined.

Reading to Discover Reading for organization is essentially the recognition of the way in which the author has planned his/her material. It is certainly difficult and probably even impossible to Organization: understand and remember a complex idea unless you can recognize the relationship of the parts that make it up—that is, its organization. In Trying to understand and remember ideas while studying an assignment (which are frequently both new and difficult), it is very important that s/he develop considerable skill in perceiving the organizational pattern of what is being read.

The problem of understanding written material becomes apparent when the time comes for the reader to combine individual ideas into larger units. It does not necessarily follow that a series of well-written sentences or paragraphs will be organized by the reader into a meaningful whole after s/he reads them. This requires real understanding and a special skill on the part of the reader.

To improve understanding and to remember what is read, it is necessary to develop the ability to group ideas into larger units or organize ideas in some meaningful way. There are five elements of organization: 1) introduction, 2) problem, 3) body, 4) transitions, and 5) summary.

1. The introduction may be found in any and all of several places: In the preface to the book; in the first chapter; and in the initial paragraphs of each chapter.

2. The problem (or argument or objective) is often stated in the preface as well as at the beginning of most chapters.

3. The body of the chapter and book usually amounts to nine-tenths of the whole. It includes the point-by-point presentation of data or steps in a process by which the author attempts to amplify the problem, argument, or objective. Once you have the problem, argument, or objective clearly in mind, your main job in reading is to see how and with what the author develops and supports it. You will need to relate his/her topics as s/he takes them up, grouping facts and data in a meaningful order so that you can more readily remember them.

4. Transitions, or guideposts, are invaluable clues to organization. They show the relationship among ideas and they indicate that the author is passing from one idea to another. Transitions may be elaborate. For example:

   1. "Having discussed five causes for the flooding of our farm land, I would now like to turn to a consideration of ways to avoid such catastrophes in the future." Or transitions may be very simple with only a phrase: "In contrast to," "at the other extreme," "on the other hand," "what was the result?" Frequently, an author uses an elaborate transition to take you from one main section to another section of equal importance. Shorter transitions are used to lead you from a main idea to a subordinate idea, or to show the relationship between two ideas in the same paragraph.

5. The summary, or conclusion, is used by the author to pull together and restate the important points already presented. Summary material gives you an opportunity to check your understanding of what you have read. Often an author uses an internal summary to restate the main points made in one small section of a chapter. Whenever you encounter summary material, whether it occurs within the chapter or at the end, you should note how much material is being summarized and how significant it is.
Below is an example of how an individual may utilize the concept of organization when reading a magazine article. However, the same principles would apply to reading a chapter or story in a text. In covering a magazine article on a new mechanical heart, the thoughts of an expert reader might run like this:

The anecdote about the dogs in surgery makes an interesting introduction; the author is leading up to his/her topic.

Now s/he is starting the topic more definitely, listing the reasons behind the research: a first reason—now a second—and now a third.

Here s/he is providing historical background, one-by-one telling of earlier models and giving their limitations.

Now s/he comes to the point, describing the newest heart machine. S/he describes the parts and explains the functions of each.

Now s/he is clinching the discussion. S/he is summarizing what has been accomplished and what is yet to be done.

The expert reader moves along the lines quickly, noting the main theme, the major divisions of thought, the main ideas and the details, all in proper relationship one to another. In effect, s/he outlines mentally while reading.

Whether you are engaged in critical reading, study reading, rapid reading, or skimming, an awareness of organization is important.

READING TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

Skill in following directions is closely related to following a sequence of events. Certain subjects require considerable use of this skill. In a mathematics or programming book the author will usually explain the importance of a process; then, s/he will generally explain how to perform the process; and last, s/he will illustrate the explanation by working through a problem. You can check for mastery of the process by working the example the author gives. If you run into trouble, glance back at the directions. Another approach is to recite the directions correctly before undertaking the procedure.

CRITICAL READING - READING TO EVALUATE

The cardinal rule of a critical reader is Don’t Believe Everything You Read. This cardinal rule sounds cynical, but it isn’t; it simply recognizes that everything we read had to be written by someone, that someone is human, and that humans aren’t perfect. Specifically, what a critical reader does while reading is:

1. Doesn’t believe everything being read.
2. Questions things that DO NOT make sense.
3. Questions some things, even though they DO make sense.
4. Rereads when it is thought s/he may have missed something.
5. Considers the type of material being read before evaluating it.
6. Considers the context when interpreting what is being read.
7. Considers the audience for whom the writing is intended.
8. Tries to determine the author’s purpose in writing.
9. Decides whether the author has accomplished his/her purpose.
10. Recognizes that the author’s attitude will influence his/her writing.
11. Recognizes that the effect on him/her of what the author says may be caused more by the author’s style of writing than by the facts presented.
13. In the case of an argument, recognizes whether or not the opponent’s viewpoint has been refuted.
15. Recognizes conflicting information and inconsistencies.
17. Recognizes and understands metaphors, figures of speech, idioms, colloquialisms, and slang.
18. Recognizes the connotations as well as the denotations of words.
19. Distinguishes between what the author really says and what s/he might seem to say.
20. Distinguishes among humor, sarcasm, irony, satire, and straightforward writing.
21. Distinguishes between necessary and probable inferences.

22. Recognizes and considers intended implications of statements made.

23. Recognizes assumptions, which are implicit in the author's statements.

24. Distinguishes fact from opinion and objective writing from subjective writing.

25. Doesn't misinterpret given data.

The critical reader adopts an inquiring attitude asking, "Does what I am reading agree with what I already know about the subject or what the instructor has said?" If not, s/he will stop and take stock to find out where the discrepancy is. Part of evaluating is learning the source of the material.

Perhaps you have compared descriptions of an event in two different sources and found considerable disagreement. For example, look up the American Revolution in an American history book and also in a history book written by an English author for English students. In some cases you would not even know the same occurrence was being described.

If you cannot see beyond the information presented, you need to learn to evaluate and think critically while reading. The critical reader draws upon personal experience and that of a variety of authorities while reading, checking what is known with what is being read and evaluating the author's logic and accuracy.

**READING TO DRAW CORRECT INFERENCES**

"Reading between the lines" is an expression often used to describe the process of extracting more than the literal meaning from printed matter. For a variety of reasons, authors do not include in their writing a direct statement of every thought they expect to convey. If an author leaves certain ideas only partially expressed (implied or hinted at) you must be aware of the need to "read between the lines"; to be aware of the author's strategy and reasons for communicating concepts through implication rather than direct statement.

Most authors assume some level of sophistication on the part of the reader, even though there may not be an awareness of this assumption. Once an author has decided (consciously or unconsciously) on the general intellectual level of his/her target readers, it is not necessary to explain details or even generalizations that presumably would already be known to the reader. Therefore, s/he explains as much as seems necessary—in terms of the targeted readership—and leaves the simpler concepts to be filled in by the reader.

Perhaps a more important reason for letting the reader draw some inferences and conclusions rather than telling him/her the corresponding ideas directly is the desire to achieve a more artistic composition. By leaving certain concepts unstated but implied, an author can often achieve a more artistic composition. Occasionally an author (especially in advertising or propaganda) omits certain information which s/he is not anxious to have the reader know.

The author's meaning in several lines of the following poem may well elude a literal-minded examination.

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It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be;
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bold, and sere;

A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May.

Although it fall and die that night--
It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see;
And in short measures life may perfect be.
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Ben Johnson, The Noble Nature

What inferences do you draw from the comparison of a man to an oak tree and oak tree to a flower? What does the poem say about quality and quantity?

In reading novels, ask yourself, "Why does this character act this way?" Of course, the best way to answer this question is to try to put yourself in the character’s position and to look at things through his/her eyes. It is also relevant to understand how the behavior of each of the major characters assists in bringing the story toward its climax or represents the meaning of the author.

Nonfiction (except for history and biography) does not have characters to consider, but you can ask yourself comparable questions: "How does membership in a group influence behavior?" (Sociology); "How do enzymes react in a variety of circumstances?" (Chemistry); "What are the difficulties in installing an automated accounting system?" (Business Administration); "What social and cultural factors affect changes in styles of art?" (Commercial and Fine Art).
READING TO GAIN MENTAL IMAGES

Using mental imagery is one way of testing your understanding of what the author is saying. For example, in reading about an improvement in farm machinery, can you visualize the machine in actual operation? You might check your mental images with illustrations and diagrams in the text as well as with verbal descriptions.

As you read fiction, can you “see” the events take place in your mind’s eye? In a course in stage lighting, can you “see” the colors change on the stage and the effects this change will have upon the set and the actors? Do you “see” the finished product after looking at a blueprint? These are examples of highly sophisticated mental imagery. The more vivid the picture or auditory image you have, the more likely it is that you understand the words of the author (or a lecturer).

References


