

Reading Basics

reading

Before you dive into that textbook, article, or novel, take a moment to think about your reading process. How can you improve your focus and motivation? Begin by determining your purpose, previewing, and pace-setting.

Determining Your Purpose

How you read depends on why you are reading and what you need to understand and remember. Some texts you may need to read analytically, and others you can skim for overarching content. Determine your purpose by considering **WHY**, **WHAT**, and **WHO**.

WHY

- What type of recall will be required?
- How does the professor use the information?
- What level of knowledge is required?

Class discussions often require you to have an overview of the text and familiarity with important passages but not the same depth of reading or recall as tests or papers. Papers or exams require a closer reading, a more detailed understanding of the text, and greater recall.

WHAT

- How difficult is the content?
- How difficult is the language?
- How detailed is the text?

Difficult content or language, as well as lots of detail, require a slower and more thorough reading.

WHO

- How much background knowledge do I have?
- How engaged or interested am I?

The more interested you are and the more background knowledge you have, the faster you'll read and comprehend the material.

Previewing

Every time you sit down to read a new chapter of a textbook or article, take a moment to preview. Previewing will provide you with an overview of the content and orient you to the chapter's key points. Check out the review questions in the front or end of a chapter. These questions signal the important material to note. Previewing will help you increase your retention and increase your reading speed because your mind is ready to receive new information.

Preview Points

- Flip through the entire chapter, quickly noting the main sections and subsections. Notice visual cues of important ideas (ie: boldface, italics, and underlining) and pictures and charts.
- Read the introduction or opening paragraph.
- Go back through the chapter, saying to yourself what you think each section will be about.
- Skim or read the summary or conclusion.

If you do this kind of preview, you can usually make more sense of class and enter into a discussion about the material.

Pace Yourself: Five Reading Paces and Their Purposes

Once you've determined your purpose and previewed your chapter, you can decide on the pace with which to read your text.

Careful or close reading—is used when the material is challenging or when close analysis is necessary. Use this kind of reading when you're studying to digest information. Careful reading is slower and should usually involve some kind of active participation. Awaken close reading by turning paragraph headings into questions that the following paragraphs answer. Take notes or textual notations.

Usual reading—When you read magazines or novels, you're using a "casual" reading speed. If you're like most people, your habitual manner of reading gets you through about 250 to 300 words per minute; faster-than-average readers may have a usual reading rate of 500 to 600 words p/m.

Accelerated reading—Often called "speed reading" requires alert attention, aggressive reading, and quick comprehension. Accelerated reading requires a greater expenditure of energy, so use it only when you have a lot of material to cover in a short period of time.

Scanning—Use scanning when you need to find something quickly. You're reading fast and looking for a particular answer to a question, a quote, or a supporting fact. The goal is to find the information you're looking for, and when you've found it, you're finished reading.

Skimming—The purpose of skimming is different from scanning because you're reading quickly to get the "gist" or impression of the whole. You're not reading all of the material, just enough to give you a sense of the text.

*Pacing descriptions adapted from St. Martin's College Reading handout.