

How can I read more efficiently?

STEP

9

'Reading is thinking with someone else's head instead of one's own.'

Arthur Schopenhauer

A Reflection

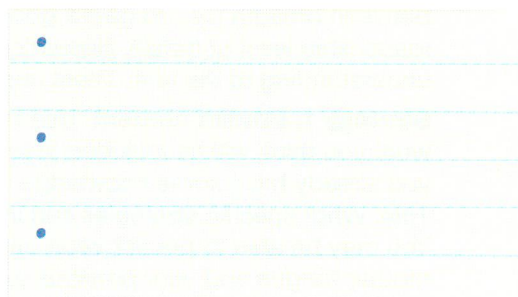
Look at the following statements about reading and tick the ones which apply to you. In each case, consider *why*.

- ☐ I often have to read a passage two or three times to understand it.
- ☐ I always read in **CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER**.
- ☐ I read every single word in the text.
- ☐ I spend lots of time looking up new words.

B Contextualization

Look at the text in the box below:

1. **Read the title** and predict the text's focus.
2. **Write down 2–3 bullet points** in the box on the right about what you want to learn from this text.
3. **What is the focus going to be?** Read the topic sentence (the first sentence of the paragraph).
4. **Read the full text** in no more than three minutes, but:
 - *do not read every single word*: divide the text into phrases
 - *do not use a dictionary*: guess at the meaning of unfamiliar words
 - *focus particularly on SIGNPOSTING LANGUAGE*: this may help your understanding



What specific strategies can improve reading skills?

In trying to develop reading skills, there are four key areas which students should try to improve: understanding, flexibility, speed and comprehension. Greater understanding comes through more active involvement in the text. Rather than just hoping that understanding will develop passively, it is imperative to examine the text analytically – whether autobiography, academic essay or newspaper article. Increased flexibility comes from not slavishly following the linear order of the text, but by adapting your reading strategies accordingly (e.g., reading the conclusion first). Turning to the issue of speed, focusing on the content-carrying words of the language, and reading in clusters of words (i.e., two-, three- and four-word phrases) can be beneficial. Finally, greater comprehension can be realized by focusing more on your prediction skills and your general understanding of the English language, and less time on your electronic dictionary. In brief, while reading may appear to be an insurmountable problem, by adopting a few key strategies, significant improvements can be made.

c Analysis

Academic reading: an overview

There are two main reasons we read: for pleasure and for information. Hopefully, your academic reading is both pleasurable and informative, although it is more likely to be the latter! Academic reading differs from other types of reading in that the texts tend to be longer and more challenging. This means that you have to be an **ACTIVE READER** to understand the texts in as much detail as possible.

For many students, reading is the strongest of the four skills. However, many still face significant challenges when starting at British universities. Reading lists can be very long, and the texts may be far more difficult than anything you have seen before. Even confident readers may need to make several important modifications to their reading skills.

Developing your reading skills

Achieving greater understanding: I often have to read a passage two or three times to understand it.

As a student, you do not have time to reread long texts. It is normal to reread certain difficult sentences or paragraphs, but if you need to read whole texts again and again in order to understand them, the problem is more serious. In your reading, you need to achieve a balance between breadth (i.e., to gain a good overall understanding of the subject) and depth (i.e., a reasonable level of detail). Becoming an **ACTIVE READER** is the best way to achieve a greater understanding of the text. There are two main strategies for doing this:

Strategy 1: Predict content. Use the **TITLE**, **SUB-HEADINGS**, **ABSTRACT** and **KEYWORDS** to predict what you think will be included in the text. This will 'warm-up' your brain, and you may find that you already have some knowledge of the topic.

Title: *What specific strategies can improve reading skills?*

You may be able to predict what might follow using your knowledge of reading skills in your mother tongue and your previous experience of learning English.

Strategy 2: Ensure you know why you are reading the text. It is important that you know *why* you are reading a text. Ask yourself what you want to learn from it. You tend to get more out of a text if you are actively searching for answers as you read it. For this particular text, you might ask:

- *What general skills can I develop and use in my reading?*
- *What are the major problems non-native speakers face in reading academic texts?*

Achieving greater flexibility: I always read in chronological order.

Academic reading is not like reading a novel: you can read the information in the order which works best for you. You should think of it like making orange juice: you want to squeeze out all the useful information you can (the juice) and then throw the rest away.

Strategy 3: Read the 'high-value' parts of a text first. For example, the topic sentence (the first sentence of a paragraph, which outlines its theme), the introduction and the conclusion.

SKIM-READING is a skill which can be usefully employed here.

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This sentence provides a clear overview of the theme of the paragraph – and makes it clear that there are four particular issues which will be discussed.

Achieving greater speed: I read every single word in the text.

Reading every word in a text is simply not an option. Not only does it take too long, it actually makes comprehension more difficult. It is important to see how the text works as a whole, rather than as a series of individual words. Two useful strategies for increasing your speed are as follows:

Strategy 4: Read in PHRASES. It is usually possible to break English texts up into phrases of two, three or four words. Looking at the first three sentences, it is clear that these phrases will often be adjectival phrases and **NOUN PHRASES** (four key areas, greater understanding) and **VERB PHRASES** (to develop, will develop passively).

Strategy 5: Focus on CONTENT WORDS (e.g., nouns and verbs) rather than **STRUCTURE WORDS** (e.g., prepositions and conjunctions). As such, by focusing on them, you are more likely to gain a general understanding of the information which really matters. The following example is taken from the penultimate sentence of the text. It is much easier to understand the main idea of the text which contains only the content words.

Structure words only	Content words only
Finally, _____ can be _____ by _____ more on your _____ _____ and your general _____ of the _____	_____, greater comprehension _____ realized _____ focusing _____ prediction skills _____ _____ understanding _____ English language, ...

Achieving greater comprehension: I spend lots of time looking up new words.

An understanding of how words work, and how they relate to each other, can help in your comprehension of the text – in particular, how the text develops and how the sentences are organized.

Strategy 6: Guess the meaning of words. Constantly looking up words is very time-consuming, and just because you have an electronic dictionary, it does not mean you have to use it. There are many clues within the text which you can use to guess at the meaning of unfamiliar words. Most of the time, an approximate meaning of the word is enough – you do not need to know the exact meaning.

- **Contextualization:** guess the meaning of the word from the context. Put in a likely synonym and see whether it makes sense.
... reading in *clusters of words* (i.e., two-, three- and four-word phrases) can be beneficial ...
Imagine *clusters* was not there; what would you put in its place? Perhaps *groups*. This meaning is confirmed by the definition which follows (i.e., two-, three- and four-word phrases).
- **Prefixes and suffixes:** the beginning and ending of the word may contain parts which tell you something about it.
Autobiography: written by a person about their own life (*auto* = 'self', *bio* = 'living', *graphy* = 'writing').
- **Word family:** although you may not be able to recognize the word, you may recognize words which have the same **ROOT**, helping you to guess its meaning.
Analytically: this word may be unfamiliar, but *analysis* is relatively common. From this (and out of knowledge that *-ly* is a common suffix for adverbs), it is possible to understand that *analytically* means 'looking at something closely and in detail'.

Strategy 7: Look for cohesion. Good writers use a range of language in the text to tell the reader where it is going. This **SIGNPOSTING LANGUAGE** can be an extremely useful 'map'.

Turning to the issue of speed: indicates that the author is moving on to a different subject.

In brief: indicates that a summary will follow.

D Activation

Read the following sentence from part B and complete tasks 1–4.

'[Increased flexibility] comes from not slavishly following the linear order of the text, but by adapting your reading strategies accordingly (e.g., reading the conclusion first).'

1. Using square brackets, divide the sentence into meaningful phrases (e.g., **increased flexibility**).
2. Underline the **CONTENT WORDS** in the text (e.g., **adapting**).
3. Without using a dictionary, guess the meaning of the following words:
 - **Slavishly**
 - **Linear**
 - **Accordingly**
4. Is there anything in the passage which can help with cohesion (e.g., **but**, indicating contradictory information)?

E Personalization

- **Analyze the source material which you used for recent essays and ask yourself:**
 - how long did it take to read?
 - were there any texts which I found particularly difficult? If so, could I have read any of them more effectively?
- **Practise the strategies identified in part D with a short text.**
- **Identify your reading speed.** There are many websites where you can get this information – e.g., www.readingsoft.com. Knowledge of this can help you plan better and be more realistic about how much background reading you can do.
- **For your next piece of reading, set yourself a time limit and stick to it. The time limit should be challenging but reasonable.**

F Extension

- Step 12 looks at **time management**, crucial because reading takes up such a high percentage of your time as a student.
- Step 18 focuses on **topic sentences**, which can be an extremely useful tool in reading more quickly.
- Steps 19 (**introductions**), 20 (**conclusions**) and 49 (**abstracts**) all focus on high-content, fact-focused parts of the essay.
- Steps 29 (**cohesion**) and 30 (**linking devices**) provide extra explanations on **SIGNPOSTING LANGUAGE**.
- Appendix 1, Step 9, Document 2 is a photocopiable document based on part B, which you can use before reading a text.
- Appendix 3, Step 9 lists high-frequency **prefixes** and **suffixes** in academic English; Appendix 4, Step 9 provides a link to a reading evaluation website.