

Skimming

Do you ever feel like you spend way too much time reading? Do you have trouble determining which parts of a text are the most important? Do you wish you could collect information from books in a quicker and more efficient way? If so, consider skimming the next time you sit down to read a text.

What is skimming?

Skimming is a strategic, selective reading method in which you focus on the main ideas of a text. When skimming, deliberately skip text that provides details, stories, data, or other elaboration. Instead of closely reading every word, focus on the introduction, chapter summaries, first and last sentences of paragraphs, bold words, and text features. Skimming is extracting the essence of the author's main messages rather than the finer points.

Why skim?

You need the “big picture” or main points when you’re reading. Even if you’re going to do a more detailed reading of the text, skimming as a form of previewing can help you better comprehend what you read. Knowing when and how to skim will help you become a more efficient, strategic reader. You’ll become better at determining what parts of the text are most important. There may also be times when your teacher wants you to understand the big picture, not all of the little details. In these cases, skimming helps you understand the overall points of the text and its relevance to your course without bogging you down.

Make the most of your time. Sometimes you don’t have time to do everything. With skimming, you’ll be able to cover vast amounts of material more quickly and save time for everything else that you have on your plate. Maybe you don’t have time to finish your reading before class, but skimming will help you get the main points and attend class much more prepared to maximize in-class learning.

You need to review a text you have read before. Skimming is also an efficient way to refresh your memory of large amounts of material before an exam. Skimming a text that you have already read helps you recall content and structure.

Skimming is not...

Skimming can present problems if not done intentionally. Skimming is not simply flipping through a text quickly or paying half attention to it. When skimming, be deliberate and intentional with what you choose to read, and make sure that you are focused. Skimming is not a lazy way out or a half-hearted attempt at reading. Make sure that you use it carefully and strategically and are able to walk away with the main ideas of the text.

Skimming methods

Beginnings & endings: Read first and last sentences of paragraphs, first and last paragraphs of major sections, and introductions and summaries of chapters.

Wheat vs. chaff: Read only the amount of text necessary to determine if a section presents a main idea or support for a main idea.

Visual & verbal cues: Watch for signal words and phrases that indicate an author's direction (e.g., however, although, moreover, in addition to). Things to focus on while skimming:

- Introduction and conclusion
- Chapter/section summaries
- First and last sentences
- Titles, subtitles, and headings
- Bold words
- Charts, graphs, or pictures
- End of chapter review questions

When to skim

There are certain texts that lend themselves to skimming better than others. **It is typically less beneficial to skim novels, poetry, and short stories or texts that do not have text features.** Non-fiction texts, like textbooks, journal articles, and essays are typically full of information and text features and are more suited for skimming.

Skimming can also be a good tool for conducting research and writing papers. Typically, when researching or writing, you will not need to read every word of every text closely, but will benefit more from skimming while evaluating your sources or identifying information important to your work.

Finally, know your context. There may be some texts that you are better off reading closely and thoroughly. Some teachers specifically tell you that they include small details from the textbook on exams. You may have some classes that are just difficult to understand, and you may find that reading closely helps you comprehend concepts better. Before skimming, spend some time thinking about your classes, teachers, and needs to determine if you have any texts you may need to read more closely.

Active reading strategies

When skimming, it's important to continue to use active reading strategies. This keeps your brain active, engaged, and focused, and helps you understand and retain information better and longer. Here are a few effective active reading strategies to pair with skimming:

Set a purpose for reading. Instead of approaching the text as something you just have to get through, identify a purpose for this reading. What do you want to get out of it? Why are you reading it? Keep this purpose in mind as you read.

Preview. Look through the text before started to read and focus on headings, illustrations, captions, highlighted items, end of chapter summaries, etc. These features give you an idea of the main concepts of the text and what you should focus on while skimming.

Make a prediction. Right after previewing, make a prediction about what you think the chapter or section is going to be about.

Activate prior knowledge. Make a list of what you already know about the topic and what you want to know about it. Identify and write down any questions you have.

Annotate. Instead of copying down copious notes from the book, jot down brief notes and thoughts (in your own words) in the margins of the text.

Summarize the main ideas. After a section or page, stop and write a 1-3 sentence summary in your own words. This keeps your brain engaged and ensures you are comprehending what you read.

Generate questions. Ask and write down questions that you have as you read the text and/or questions that you would ask a class if you were the instructor. Try using different levels of questions.

Works consulted

Holschuh, J. and Nist, S. (2000). *Active learning: Strategies for college success*. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon.
“Tips & Tools.” Learning Center, learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/.