

phone number and address. One thing is certain; you do not read systematically through every single notice, starting at the top left hand corner down to the bottom right, making copious notes of the entire contents of the For Sale board!

How then do you apply this common-sense efficiency in reading to the sorts of reading you have to do in your studies? Take a closer look at the processes you would have used on the noticeboard:

- SURVEY your reading matter critically - title/chapter heading, subtitle, author, date of publication, contents, index. Do the chapters have summaries or lists of key points or dates at the beginning or end? If so, read this *first*. The survey should take a minute or two. It is a vital first stage. Don't skip it.
- QUESTION yourself about what exactly you are expecting to get out of the book or chapter, to keep your reading active and your concentration good.
- READ! Reading is the third, not the first and last stage in active reading. By now you can pinpoint what you are going to read and what you want to get out of your reading. But don't settle down to read every word. As with the noticeboard, you will *skim* some bits for an overview; *scan* others for a particular piece of information; *read in detail* only those sections you absolutely have to. I hope to convince you in the reading exercises which follow (pp. 11-13), that relatively little needs to be read in detail, and that you can get the main points out of most paragraphs by skilful skim reading.
- RECALL. What have you just read? Can you answer the questions you set yourself at the outset? Now is the time to make your notes. But don't copy. Set out the main points as you remember them. Leave lots of space to add detail and check with the text if you need to.
- REVIEW Quickly look back over the text to make sure you haven't missed anything or distorted points in your notes. Skim read.

This strategic approach to reading - Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review or SQ3R for short - will save you time and effort. You may enjoy the challenge of tackling a jigsaw without looking at the picture, but of course it is easier when you know roughly

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Reading for History Students

HISTORY TEXTBOOKS tend to be fat, wouldn't you agree? Fortunately, authors and publishers are increasingly aware of how off-putting pages of close set type can be and do their best to break it up with summaries of key dates, questions to think about, maps, and extracts from historical documents. But there's no getting away from it - the evil moment comes every week, when there is no alternative but to get down to your reading.

If you find your eyelids grow heavy, and you turn the page without a clue about what you've just read, then this article is for you. Read on.

Don't settle down to read every word though. How much time have you got to devote to this article? You don't at this point know if what I'm going to say is of any relevance or interest to you, and your time is precious. So how do you know in advance of reading a piece whether it's worth taking time over or not?

Try the common-sense approach to reading you use in everyday life. Think about how you read notices on a crowded noticeboard, for example. If you are looking for a particular item for sale, you will *scan* the whole board, barely registering the majority of the notices as you search for a single item. A few you will *skim* read briefly - long enough to register that the item isn't what you want, and then you speed on. You will probably only *read in detail* one or two notices, the ones you want to think about. You may *re-read* these to make sure you have all the details, and to *make notes* - in this case, details of the item, contact

where the pieces fit. The same with reading - the detail makes sense more quickly when you have an overview.

Of the three reading techniques I've mentioned, skimming is probably the most underused. If you are to skim read effectively, you need to know where to look for the main idea in a paragraph since paragraphs are the units that make up longer sections. To do this, you need to think about how writing is structured.

In your own writing, when you move on to a new idea, you start a new paragraph. Your plan for an answer to the essay question, 'Have the achievements of the Elizabethan seamen been exaggerated?' will have points for and points against. Each of these points will be developed into paragraphs in your essay. You start each paragraph with your point expressed as clearly as possible. The sentence in which the writer expresses this new or main idea is known as the 'topic sentence'.

The topic sentence is usually the first sentence in the paragraph. In the middle of the paragraph the writer explains, develops and illustrates this idea. The last sentence often directly picks up the idea in the topic sentence and shows how the rest of the paragraph has modified or developed it.

• *Try it. Look back at the last two paragraphs. Do they follow this pattern? For each, pick out*

- i the beginning: topic sentence
- ii the middle: explanation, illustration
- iii the end: linking back to the idea in the topic sentence.

They do, don't they? So it stands to reason that if you want to know what a paragraph is about, you read the first sentence. If you want to see how a writer has developed the idea, read the last sentence as well.

• *Read only the first sentence of the first four paragraphs of this article.*

How much would you have missed if you had only read these sentences and not the whole paragraph? Not a lot I reckon. The first paragraph was a general introduction to the sorts of reading you have to do in history, and offers, I hope, some encouragement to read on. The second has no development and cannot really be termed a paragraph. A short paragraph like this every

now and again breaks up the reading task, but too many short paragraphs suggests that the writer does not know how to develop an idea, and is simply listing points - a bad sign at A Level. 'Don't settle down to read every word . . .' in the third paragraph gives a clear indication of what that paragraph is about as does the first sentence in the fourth paragraph.

• *Now read the first and last sentences of the third and fourth paragraphs.*

In these two paragraphs, the last sentence links clearly back to the first.

Skim reading the topic sentence of a paragraph should give you a clear indication of what the paragraph is about. If you then decide to read the paragraph, it's because you think the paragraph has something to offer you. Your *survey* and *questioning* have pinpointed something for *detailed* reading.

• *Does any of the first four paragraphs look worth a closer look?*

My guess is paragraph four, if any. Here the article begins to get down to the nitty gritty of reading strategies. Alternatively, you may have surveyed the rest of the article, realised that this paragraph too was introductory and have decided to plunge in perhaps round about here. Good for you!

• *Read only the first sentence of each paragraph in the following extract, once only, and answer the following questions.*

- i) What is known about a) pupil numbers and b) the quality of education in the mid-nineteenth century?
- ii) What was the response of the authorities to this?

Educational statistics show a steady rise in pupil numbers but the overall quality of education is unmeasurable. It is known that absenteeism was common and that education was frequently regarded as a subordinate function of childhood. As late as 1840, probably one-third of all children never attended a day school. Since the length of education for working class children rarely exceeded three and a half years, and was commonly less than two, levels of attainment even from reputable establishments cannot have been high.

The lack of control over educational output caused increasing alarm. In the early 1830s, roughly 60 per cent of all schools were private, rather than church, establishments and many feared, as had Davies Giddy MP in 1807, that in these ordinary folk would learn to read 'seditious pamphlets, vicious books and publications against Christianity' (260.9). Church schools, by contrast, were regarded as safe.

(*The Forging of the Modern State 1783-1870* by Eric J. Evans, Longman, 1983, p. 232.)

- Now skim read the extract, first and last sentences only, and see what additional information you gain.

Did you need to read the whole paragraph to have a pretty good idea of what it is about? There may be times when you do need figures and names, but if you do, you know where to find them. You don't need this information for routine background reading.

- Try skim reading again, this time on a longer extract. Read only the first sentence of each paragraph. The question in your mind before you start reading is 'What is this paragraph going to be about?' Jot down your expectation of what each paragraph will be about after you have read the topic sentence.

Not only was Charles a threat to Francis but also the reverse was true. Charles had the difficulty of co-ordinating men and money from scattered territories, with France eager to exploit any weakness in the chain. Meanwhile, France as a unitary state did not experience the same logistical problems and could strike at whichever part of the empire seemed vulnerable. Charles was a man of integrity and he found the unscrupulous Francis very hard to deal with, especially when the latter allied with the great enemy of Christendom, the Ottoman Empire.

There were also other irritants to drive the two sides apart. Italy had been a battleground since the fifteenth century and only domination by one side would end the conflict there. Charles wished to regain Burgundy, the ancestral home of his dynasty, annexed by France in 1477. Similarly the incorporation of Navarre into Castile was not recognised by France. These old disputes could be revived whenever circumstances seemed appropriate (so France

could take advantage of the revolt of the *Comuneros* by reasserting claims to Navarre).

Ultimately, Francis I could not tolerate Charles' claim to dominance. The latter might protest, as he did in 1536. 'There are those who say that I wish to rule the world, but both my thoughts and my deeds demonstrate the contrary'. But this was hardly enough to dissuade Francis from plotting the downfall of his great rival.

The effect upon Charles' policies was immediately apparent. Decisive action against the emergent German Protestantism had to be postponed and, not for the last time, the internal needs of Charles' empire were sacrificed to the struggle against 'the most Christian' King of France.

(*Years of Renewal. European History 1470-1600* ed John Lotherington, Hodder and Stoughton 1988, p. 192.)

In this extract the topic sentences act as neon lights flashing up what is to follow. If you want to know more about the 'other irritants', driving Francis and Charles apart, for example, you can go back and read paragraph two in detail.

When you identify a piece you know you need to read in detail, do use the textual clues to make sure you have all the information. The phrase 'other irritants' suggests that not all the irritants are to follow - one at least has already been mentioned. Words like 'similarly' indicate that the point just made and the one about to be made are similar. Did you spot that? 'But' suggests a change of direction; 'meanwhile' points you to things happening simultaneously. Awareness of these 'markers' helps to keep your reading active, and you alert.

What I have proposed here is a strategy for reading. Don't adopt the donkey approach, munching through the pages. Take an active, critical approach to everything you have to read.

Make your reading matter: justify the time you spend on it.

Survey it first - is it relevant? Which bits? How long are the sections I have to read? Note the chapter and section headings. Look for the summary.

Question your purpose in reading. Be clear about what you expect to find out, and where it is likely to be.

Read in different ways according to your purpose. *Scan* for particular pieces of information. *Skim* for an overview of a section. *Read in detail* only when you have to, and only when you have located the information you need.

Recall what you've read, and make notes now.

Review the section, chapter or book for anything you've missed, and to help to 'fix' it in your mind.

• A final reading activity. Scan this article to find the following:

- i When was Burgundy annexed by France?
- ii What proportion of children never attended school in the 1840s?
- iii Where is the term 'marker' defined?
- iv What is the date of publication of the book from which the first extract was taken?
- v What is the shorthand for the reading strategy I suggest?
- vi Where do you normally find the topic sentence?

Aren't you glad you didn't have to read every word to extract this information from the article? You don't read every word of a newspaper, so why attempt it in your studies? It is not only slow, but inefficient. Vary your pace and style of reading according to your purpose at the time. This isn't cheating - it's intelligent reading.

Kate Williams is author of *Study Skills*, Macmillan, 1989.

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Making Notes

MOST STUDENTS spend a lot of their time making notes. Why do they do it? What form do their notes take? What use do they make of them afterwards? Are they always worth the paper they are written on? These are the kinds of question that I will consider.

Why Make Notes?

As with all aspects of studying, the most appropriate way of making notes depends on your purpose. So, it is useful to be clear in your own mind about why you are making notes. Possible purposes:

- 1 'To help me understand what I'm hearing or reading about while I am studying it.'
- 2 'To ensure I keep paying attention.'
- 3 'To help me review the learning session afterwards.'
- 4 'To ensure I have as full a statement as possible of what was actually said.'
- 5 'To record my own thoughts or examples concerning what is being said.'
- 6 'To remind myself of follow-up reading, etc.'
- 7 'To have material to revise for exams.'
- 8 'To sort out my own ideas on a topic.'
- 9 'To plan my work for an assignment or in an exam.'

Looking at the list above, I see an important distinction between