

## HANDOUT · META-LEARNING · EFFICIENT READING

DANIEL BILAR, NORWICH UNIVERSITY

*Adapted from the Academic Skills Center, Dartmouth College, ©2001*

### SUMMARY

The most effective way of spending each study hour is to devote as little time as possible to reading and as much time as possible to testing yourself, reviewing, organizing, and relating the concepts and facts, mastering the technical terms, formulas, etc., and thinking of applications of the concepts.

In short, **spend your time learning ideas, not painfully processing words visually.**

### MYTH: YOU MUST READ EVERY WORD

Many of the words used in writing grammatically correct sentences actually convey no meaning. If, in reading, you exert as much effort in conceptualizing these meaningless words as you do important ones, you limit not only your reading speed but your comprehension as well.

### MYTH: READING ONCE IS ENOUGH

Skim once *as rapidly as possible* to determine the main idea and to identify those parts that need careful reading. Reread more carefully to plug the gaps in your knowledge. For almost all students in most subjects, reading once is not enough.

However, this is not to imply that an **unthinking Pavlovian-like rereading** is necessary to understand and retain material. Many students automatically regress or reread doggedly with a self-punishing attitude. (“I didn’t get a thing out of that paragraph the first time, so if I punish myself by rereading it maybe I will this time.”) This is the **hardest way** to do it.

Good reading is *selective reading*: It involves selecting those sections that are relevant to your purpose in reading.

Rather than automatically rereading, take a few seconds to quiz yourself on the material you have just read and then review those sections that are still unclear or confusing to you.

### MYTH: SKIPPING PASSAGES IS BAD

Many students feel that it is somehow sinful to skip passages in reading and to read rapidly. This is nonsense. The Pareto rule applies also to texts: **80% of the concepts are in 20% of the text.** See below on tips on how to identify those 20%.

## MYTH: FASTER READING MEANS LESS COMPREHENSION

Many people refuse to push themselves faster in reading for fear that they will lose comprehension. However, empirical speed reading research shows that there is little relationship between rate and comprehension. Some students read rapidly and comprehend well, others read slowly and comprehend poorly.

Whether you have good comprehension depends on whether you can extract and retain the important ideas from your reading, not on how fast you read

If you concentrate on your purpose for reading – e.g. *locating main ideas and details, and forcing yourself to stick to the task of finding them quickly* – both your speed and comprehension will increase with time and practice. Your concern should be not with how fast you can get through a chapter, but with how quickly you can locate the facts and ideas that you need. Your reading should be *goal-oriented*.

## HOWTO: SKIMMING FOR THE MAIN IDEAS

- (1) **Read** the **title**, the **abstract/summary** and the **results** first to get the structure of the text
- (2) **Review** in your mind **what you know** about the topic. This serves several purposes. First, it clarifies whether you in fact know enough background to appreciate the paper. Second, it refreshes your memory about the topic. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it helps you as the reader integrate the new information into your previous knowledge about the topic. That is, it is used as a part of the self-education process that any professional must continue throughout his/her career.
- (3) **Look** carefully at the **headings** and other **organizational or keyword clues**. These tip you off to the main points that the author wants you to learn. You may be accustomed to overlooking boldface headings and titles which are the obvious clues to the most important ideas. If you concentrate on the details and ignore the main ideas, you will have much more difficulty retaining the information you read.

Some organizational clues include

- I *Major headings and subheadings* to convey major points.
  - II *Italicized words and phrases* so that crucial new terms and definitions will stand out
  - III *Lists of points* set off by numbers or paragraphs that begin with the phrases such as “The three most important factors . . . ” etc.
  - IV *Redundancy* or repetition. By stating and restating the facts and ideas, the author ensures that you will be exposed in different ways to the concepts she feels are the most crucial for you to understand.
- (4) **Organize the questions you have** about the text. This will serve as your goal as you go through.
  - (5) **Read quickly without rereading** through the text while keeping the abstract, the structure, keyword clues and your questions in the back of your mind.