Active readers use reading strategies to help save time and cover a lot of ground. Your purpose for reading should determine which strategy or strategies to use.

1. **Previewing the text to get an overview**

**What is it?** Previewing a text means that you get an idea of what it is about without actually reading the main body of the text.

**When to use it:** to help you decide whether a book or journal is useful for your purpose; to get a general sense of the article structure, to help you locate relevant information; to help you to identify the sections of the text you may need to read and the sections you can omit.

To preview, start by reading:

- the title and author details
- the abstract (if there is one)
- then read only the parts that ‘jump out’; that is: main headings and sub headings, chapter summaries, any highlighted text
- examine any illustrations, graphs, tables or diagrams and their captions, as these usually summarise the content of large slabs of text
- the first sentence in each paragraph

2. **Skimming**

**What is it?** Skimming involves running your eye very quickly over large chunks of text. It is different from previewing because skimming involves the paragraph text. Skimming allows you to pick up some of the main ideas without paying attention to detail. It is a fast process. A single chapter should take only a few minutes.

**When to use it:** to quickly locate relevant sections from a large quantity of written material. Especially useful when there are few headings or graphic elements to gain an overview of a text. Skimming adds further information to an overview.

How to skim:

- note any bold print and graphics.
- start at the beginning of the reading and glide your eyes over the text very quickly.
- do not actually read the text in total. You may read a few words of every paragraph, perhaps the first and last sentences.
- always familiarise yourself with the reading material by gaining an overview and/or skimming before reading in detail.

3. **Scanning**

**What is it?** Scanning is sweeping your eyes (like radar) over part of a text to find specific pieces of information.

**When to use it:** to quickly locate specific information from a large quantity of written material.

To scan text:

- after gaining an overview and skimming, identify the section(s) of the text that you probably need to read.
start scanning the text by allowing your eyes (or finger) to move quickly over a page.
as soon as your eye catches an important word or phrase, stop reading.
when you locate information requiring attention, you then slow down to read the relevant section more thoroughly.
scanning and skimming are no substitutes for thorough reading and should only be used to locate material quickly.

4. Intensive reading

What is it? Intensive reading is detailed, focused, ‘study’ reading of those important parts, pages or chapters.

When to use it: When you have previewed an article and used the techniques of skimming and scanning to find what you need to concentrate on, then you can slow down and do some intensive reading.

How to read intensively:

- start at the beginning. Underline any unfamiliar words or phrases, but do not stop the flow of your reading.
- if the text is relatively easy, underline, highlight or make brief notes (see ‘the section on making notes from readings).
- if the text is difficult, read it through at least once (depending on the level of difficulty) before making notes.
- be alert to the main ideas. Each paragraph should have a main idea, often contained in the topic sentence (usually the first sentence) or the last sentence.
- when you have finished go back to the unfamiliar vocabulary. Look it up in an ordinary or subject-specific dictionary. If the meaning of a word or passage still evades you, leave it and read on. Perhaps after more reading you will find it more accessible and the meaning will become clear. Speak to your tutor if your difficulty continues.
- write down the bibliographic information and be sure to record page numbers (more about this in the section on making notes from readings).

Remember, when approaching reading at university you need to make intelligent decisions about what you choose to read, be flexible in the way you read, and think about what you are trying to achieve in undertaking each reading task.

See next: More reading strategies