



Session

READING: SCANNING, SKIMMING, PREVIEWING

At the end of this session, international students will be able to:

- Read more effectively using strategies of scanning, skimming and previewing
- Appreciate how to read for different purposes
- Locate information efficiently
- Use these strategies for research purposes for a forthcoming assignment

How and when to use this material

The exercises can be used as a single session or as two or three separate sessions, interwoven into lecturers' usual teaching. Lecturers might want to introduce one or two elements (e.g. scanning and skimming) in the first or second week of semester, and then the third element (previewing) when students start to think about preparing their first assignments. The second activity is set out as an easy or more advanced activity, depending on the skills level of the cohort.

This session works well if it is preceded by the session on **Note-taking strategies for lectures and seminars.**

Introduction

The examples in this session provide students with the opportunity to work with different text types or genres (an online news item, a corporate website and an academic article). Linking the exercise/s to students' current reading in a unit and also to forthcoming assignments will highlight the relevance of reading as research.

There are four activities in this session, starting with an exercise which seeks to identify the current strategies students use for reading, and then builds skills that

enable students to engage differently - and for different purposes - with reading materials. Example texts used here focus on the topic of the media and whistleblowing.

Undergraduate programs in mainland China rarely require students to read widely and extensively. Usually, students have little exposure to authentic English language texts. Instead, they are required to concentrate on a single textbook per unit so have little experience of reading large amounts of information from multiple, authentic sources that may express conflicting viewpoints. At the same time, the way that English is taught in China (through 'intensive reading') encourages students to concentrate on grammar and the decoding of separate words that make up sentences, rather than on the broader meaning of texts. Therefore, without effective reading strategies, Chinese students can easily become overwhelmed as they seek to dissect every word in each of the multiple texts they are required to read each week in their Australian postgraduate courses. Using skimming and scanning strategies requires students to re-think their approach to making meaning from English language texts and is something that needs to be explicitly taught and practised.

Lecturer input

Explain that reading is a research skill.

There are different strategies for reading academic and media articles or texts. **Scanning** helps you identify whether the article is going to be relevant for your assignment or not. **Skimming** gives you the general gist (i.e. the essence) and purpose of the article. **Previewing** an article provides you with an overview of the key ideas and sections which are worth reading in a bit more depth. Finally, the strategy of **intensive, in-depth reading** is when you read a text thoroughly and in-depth, taking notes.

Student activity 1: Reading for assignments

Begin by pointing to the title of an upcoming assignment in a particular unit, such as the first formative essay. Facilitate general class discussion about how students previously have obtained information for assignments.

Write this up on a whiteboard under three headings: Positive, Minus, Interesting. (The strategy - PMI - assists students to recognise clear differences between helpful and unhelpful practices.)

- Place any strategies that you want to affirm in the Positive column (these are strategies you think students will find helpful in your unit in future).
- Place strategies that may trip students up in the Australian context in the Minus column.
- In the Interesting column, place any approaches that are fascinating but unlikely to be required for your unit.
- Keep PMI visible and continue to add to it as the session progresses.

Student Activity 2: Scanning

This activity requires students to scan a text, moving their eyes quickly over the text in order to identify the main ideas, seek a relevant word, phrase, concept or idea.

A. Easy reading

Students have 3 minutes to read a short news story and then answer questions. Choose a text that's relevant to your unit OR refer to the following online ABC text about whistleblowing as an example:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-14/snowden-documents-could-become-us-27nightmare27/4819010>

Ask students basic questions related to the text, e.g.:

- *In which country is the newspaper La Nacion based?*
- *Which country is trying to find Snowden?*
- *Why are they looking for him?*
- *Why are Latin American leaders angry with the USA?*

Have students compare their answers in pairs, reminding them that the idea is not to look for right or wrong answers but for what they have gleaned from their quick scan.

Now, as a class, discuss what the pairs got out of this activity. Why might some have found out more than another? Discuss how it is not always necessary to read every word, or every sentence in depth to glean the general gist of an article.

B. More advanced reading, if the cohort is ready for it.

This more advanced example is about whistleblowing:

<http://www.whistleblowing.com.au/whistleblowing/>

Students have three minutes to answer the following questions:

- *What is whistleblowing?*
- *What are two benefits of whistleblowing?*
- *In Australia, why might some people be reluctant to be whistleblowers?*
- *'Dobbing' is an Australian expression. Guess what it means and explain your guess to your colleague.*

Follow the same process as above, putting students first into pairs and then having a whole class discussion.

Lecturer input: Summary of scanning

To summarise, discuss the strategies that students used for the last exercise. (Add to the PMI any new strategies or reinforce any that students had previously suggested.)

Chances are they didn't read the whole thing word for word or, if they tried to, they weren't able to read the article and get to the questions in the time available. Point out that sometimes it is not necessary to read a text in great detail, or to comprehend every word. The gist of an article can be gleaned from quickly scanning an article to look for its relevance or to find words or ideas of interest. Consider if any answers are debatable or if some students came up with different (but equally valid) perspectives on the text.

Discuss how scanning is useful in deciding whether or not an article might be worth reading in more detail.

Student activity 3: Skimming

Ask students, in pairs, groups or in class, to discuss what comes to mind when they hear the word 'skimming'. E.g.: throwing a smooth pebble across water, a speed boat, a spoon across soup? Explain that in these examples, contact is not thorough and deep; only every now and then the water/soup is touched. Skim reading - or speed reading - is like this.

Now show a slide of an extract of a newspaper story or journal article with most of the text out of focus or blacked out, including the heading, and with a few key words scattered throughout. Ask students to predict what the article is about and write this down. This requires them to make a commitment based on a quick reading.

Get the cohort to provide responses. Lecturer should ask what it was that they looked for, or that gave them clues. Go on to explain that the layout of a text offers clues as to what it's about, i.e. headings and subheadings, images, how quotations and key ideas are set out, etc.

Now hand out a newspaper article with most of the text out of focus or blacked out, leaving headings and largest font, with a few key words scattered throughout. (Select a media text relevant to your unit, or refer to the attached **Handout 1: Blacked out text**. Note that the attached handout includes both blacked out text and also a clear copy.)

Give students about three minutes to skim through the newspaper article. After three minutes, ask them in pairs to write down answers to the below questions:

- *What is the article trying to get the reader to do or know?*
- *Who might be most interested in reading this article?*
- *Guess at what you would expect to be found in the various parts of the article.*
- *Ask the cohort if they got all the answers. Why or why not?*

Lecturer input: Skimming summary

Summarise students' responses to the above questions. Remind them that they don't need to read every single word in an article to get the general gist. Skimming is a way of reading something quickly, flitting over key words, and predicting the rest.

To skim an academic article, one might look at:

- Title
- Abstract
- Sub-headings
- Bold, italicised or underlined text, diagrams and images
- Overall layout

Student activity 4: Previewing a text

Select a text relevant to the unit – or use the following example about media and whistleblowing:

Ding, H. 2009. Rhetorics of Alternative Media in an Emerging Epidemic: SARS, Censorship, and Extra-Institutional Risk Communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 18(4), 327-350.

Note to Lecturer

Depending on the levels of English in the class, this exercise may be more effective if you ask students to familiarise themselves with both the selected article *in advance* of this session, and also the diagram of **How to preview a text**. It may be worth handing these out the week before for preparation.

First, give students a copy of the abstract only and read this aloud to students.

Facilitate general discussion about what students think the article will be about, and clarify any vocabulary. Note any key words, especially any pertinent to the unit as a whole.

Now give students the attached **Handout 2: How to preview a text** to show them the process of this exercise.

- Ask students to identify key headings.
- Students find the topic sentence (usually the first) in each paragraph in the first two or three pages, and also the conclusion.
- Point out to students that each paragraph contains a discrete idea encapsulated in the topic sentence.
- Ask students to decide where they will find the following:
 1. The main aim of the paper
 2. A definition of 'alternative media' and 'guerrilla media'
 3. The type of research methods that the author used for the study
 4. Where the author sums up the findings and tells the reader what they mean
 5. The conclusions of the study
- Ask students to compare the conclusions with where the author states at the beginning of the paper what the paper set out to do. How do these compare?

Teaching input: Previewing summary

During the above activity, point out how much information need not be read in detail to still understand the key ideas.

- In passing, also note how references are used throughout, in the text and also in the reference list.
- Go over **Handout 2: How to preview a text**, discussing its usefulness.
- Point out that this is a short-cut way of (a) making a quick judgement about whether or not an article is worth a closer read, or (b) finding information without necessarily reading every single word.

Discuss how from this activity students might go about finding information for their forthcoming assignment.

Explain that skimming and scanning help to establish the relevance of an article and whether or not you need to read it. Previewing gives you a good idea of the contents and perspective of the article.

The final stage in reading is **detailed, in-depth reading** where you read carefully and thoughtfully in order to understand all sections. You highlight or underline key passages or headings, and also make notes both in the margins and also in a separate file. (See Session on **Note-taking.**)

Emphasise that note-taking is an intrinsic part of in-depth reading. It's useful to start by highlighting or underlining important sections in the article. But it's also important to make separate notes because these will emphasise and summarise key ideas and arguments, and their significance. Jot down any connections you see to your other readings or lectures. Also, note any connections to your assignment topics.

Emphasise that when making notes, it is important to carefully record the reference. (See Session on **Citing, referencing and plagiarism.**)



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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

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