

Know When and What to Skip

What you bring to your reading is far more important than the words themselves. All the knowledge you've gained from life so far—both the knowledge of the world and the knowledge of how written works are constructed—helps you know what a passage means. In a strange sense, you know what you're going to read before you even start.

Let's take a closer look at that apparent paradox. The secret of reading efficiently is to sample the text and make predictions. The reader takes chances and risks making errors, in order to predict what a passage means. Unless the reader feels free to take chances and make mistakes, he or she can never make any real headway.

We read to identify meaning, not to identify letters or words. A reader cannot process letters, words, and meanings all at the same time. Natural limitations in our memory systems prevent it (for example, we can remember phone numbers, but just barely—seven digits is about our max). We slow down to look at letters, letter clusters, or words only when we are surprised or confused—when what we expected to read wasn't there.

The reader guesses the meaning of unfamiliar words from context or else just skips them. Even in textbook or technical material, the best strategy is to skip a new word the first time it appears, expecting it to be explained or defined contextually before too long. Of course, if the new word is not explained, keeps reappearing, and seems to be important, then the reader can use a dictionary or guess. But consider if you are engrossed in a personal letter from a

friend or an exciting novel. Do you stop when you read an unfamiliar word? Of course not.

As a good reader, you take an active role, bringing to bear your knowledge of the world and of the particular topic in the passage. You read as though you expect the passage to make sense. Therefore, with difficult or unfamiliar material, the best approach may be to push ahead, especially on the first reading, trusting that the reading will become easier as you continue predicting meaning, making guesses, and taking chances.

If you didn't do these things, psychologists tell us, you couldn't read at all. Their research suggests that the reader relies as little as possible on visual information. Good readers sample the passage economically, searching for major points and key terms.

What happens when your predictions go awry (as they will, from time to time)? You correct surprises by circling back when tentative interpretations or predictions are not successful. At the same time, however, you maintain enough speed to overcome the limitations of the visual processing and memory systems.

