

X-Ray Vision

Remember the Terminator? In those movies, the main character is a robot that looks human. In other words, beneath his flesh and blood lies a metal skeleton (never mind that the actor who played him, Arnold Schwarzenegger, was better at playing robots than humans).

An x-ray would have quickly revealed the Terminator's identity. Using x-ray vision (metaphorically speaking), you can also quickly discover the skeleton, or structure, beneath the surface of the words in a passage. The surface features, whether of text or robot, can be deceiving, but if you can discern what lies beneath, you will have a true sense of the passage's meaning.

You can learn to use x-ray vision to help you answer three questions about any given chunk of prose:

1. **What is the passage about?** By quickly scanning the entire passage, you can grasp a sense of the writer's topic and probably something about the writer's approach.

Is the work mainly fact or fiction? Is the work from the world of science (you'll be tipped off, most likely, by the presence of technical terms and references to experiments) or social sciences (trends, correlations, causes, and consequences)? Is the text written in first person or third person? The answers to these questions help set the stage for this one:

2. **What are the parts or sections of the passage?** If the writer is worth her salt, she will have presented some support for her main point. Can you recognize the nature of that support? Typically, an author will present several reasons or examples

to convince the reader that the thesis is true. If you can recognize these subpoints, you will be able to see the passage fall neatly into sections.

Most passages can be organized into a hierarchy with the thesis on top, supporting points below, and explanatory details even farther down. Once you see the pattern, you can zero in on what you really want to know or what question you're trying to answer. Finally, use your x-ray vision to answer this last question:

3. **How do the parts fit together?** Each passage may have a beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order. So pay attention to transition words and terms. Some transition words tell you that the writer is continuing a particular chain of thought by adding information. These words and phrases include: *additionally, also, moreover, not only, but, another, furthermore, and for example*. Other transition words and phrases may signal a change or reversal: *however, on the other hand, but, and yet*. Still others tell you the writer is reaching a conclusion: *therefore, then, thus, in sum, and in short*.

If you have a clear idea of the overall development of the passage, you will be able to answer thesis questions more easily and understand how the various parts of the argument fit together. Be on the lookout for contrasting points of view. Most selections will present one argument and briefly describe a competing or conflicting idea. Fictional passages may pit what the main character thinks against what others think.

It may also be true that your x-ray vision will spot a broken bone, in other words, a flaw, in the passage. Perhaps one of the subpoints is not fully developed, or maybe the thesis comes after some of the supporting information. In any event, learning to develop x-ray vision will reveal to you whatever lurks beneath the surface.