

READING: APPROACHING ACADEMIC TEXTS

ACADEMIC SKILLS AND LANGUAGE WORKSHOP
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OUTLINE

- Difficulties in L2 reading
- Reading speed
- Strategies for more efficient reading
- SQRRR
- Decoding discourse features
- Critical reading
- Further advice and help



DIFFICULTIES IN L2 READING

Discussion question

What difficulties have you encountered in reading in English for your academic programme?



DIFFICULTIES IN L2 READING

Frequently mentioned:

- Slow reading speed
- Lack of vocabulary



HOW TO READ FASTER

1) Avoid subvocalising!

- **Don't speak the words aloud** as you read them.
- Sub-vocalisation **slows down** your reading
- If you subvocalise, reading speed = about **60 wpm**
(Nunan, 1991)
- **Reading speed of average reader in L1 =**

up to 300 wpm



VARYING YOUR READING SPEED

You cannot afford just to read at whatever speed comes 'naturally'. If you are trying to keep abreast of a course of study, you often have to push yourself to do a lot more reading than you would achieve at a 'natural' rate.

However, there is a wide range of reading speeds, from a lightning **skim** through a whole book to the **intensive study** of a difficult paragraph. You need to become accustomed to working at different points on that scale depending on the circumstances. How fast you should go will depend on:

- what you already know about the subject you are studying
- how difficult the text is
- how thoroughly you need to understand it

Northedge (1990: 34-5)



NS EXAMPLE 1 (ME)

- **Intensive reading: dense academic text**
- Introduction to journal article **in my field** (TESOL) but summarising **unfamiliar** research (*peer response*) and an **unfamiliar** sociocultural theory (*activity theory*) – 1560 words including citations
- My reading speed: **159 wpm**



SAMPLE OF TEXT 1

According to Leont'ev, activity “answers to a specific need of the active agent” of the activity (Leont'ev, 1981, as cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 217). Leont'ev (1978) depicts human behaviors at three hierarchical levels: activity, which is driven by a motive; action, which is driven by a goal; and operation, which refers to the specific conditions under which the actions are performed. From Leont'ev's theoretical perspective, human activities are driven by motives and are realized in goal-directed actions performed under specific conditions. Analysis at the activity level sheds light on why an activity is taking place (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), but human activity cannot be understood outside the context of specific actions. Leont'ev (1978) conceives the relation of activity and action in this way: When an internal or external process (i.e., action) is viewed “from the point of view of its relation to motive” (p. 64), it is regarded as activity. At the same time, however, an individual's activity and actions could be potentially disassociated due to the multifaceted and complex nature of activity or the division of labor in collective activities.

Zhu, W. and Mitchell, D. A. (2012). Participation in peer response as activity: An examination of peer response stances from an activity theory perspective. *TESOL Quarterly* 46: 362–386.



NS EXAMPLE 2 (ME)

- Skim reading: general interest magazine article
- *BBC News Magazine* feature about Soviet spies in London. Fairly informal style, fairly short sentences – 1310 words
- My reading speed: **303 wpm**



SAMPLE OF TEXT 2

The 1961 story of the Portland spy ring reads like a Cold War thriller - Soviet agents with assumed identities, a secret radio transmitter and microdots hidden in books. But the story didn't play out in West Berlin or Washington DC, but in an unassuming bungalow in the London suburb of Ruislip.

Cranley Drive, Ruislip, is a street like hundreds of others in London's outer suburbs. It can't have changed much since, in the mid-1950s, Peter and Helen Kroger bought their home.

The house was a bungalow. But it would have seemed big enough for the middle-aged Canadian couple with no children. Initially, Peter Kroger ran an antiquarian bookshop on the Strand in the centre of London. Eventually, however, he worked from home, dispatching parcels around the world.

Dowd, V. 2014. The spies in a suburban bungalow. *BBC News Magazine* [online publication]. URL <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29985359>. Accessed 12 November 2014.



VARYING YOUR READING SPEED

Northedge's rule-of-thumb (for mature NS students new to university study):

	wpm
▪ easy text; fairly familiar material	100+
▪ moderately hard text	70
▪ difficult text (to understand in depth)	40

(Northedge 1990)

Discussion question

Do you think these are reasonable targets for you?



READING EXPERIMENT

You will be divided into **2 separate groups**.

Don't compare your notes and answers with anyone in the other group until you're asked to!

The title of the text you will be reading is *how do Chinese students learn and study?*



READING EXPERIMENT

Procedure

Read the text as follows:

- 1) Survey the text first quickly, looking at
 - the **title**
 - author** details
 - the **section headings**
 - any **graphics** (data in tables, for example).
- 2) **Study** the text in detail
- 3) **Write three questions** about the information in the text



READING EXPERIMENT

Discussion questions

- What information was left out of the version?
- What does the experiment show?
- What do you think you can learn/apply from this experiment?



HOW TO READ FASTER

2) Read efficiently

= read **economically**:

read *less* for the *same gain*

2 main strategies

- **skimming**
- **scanning**



Discussion question

skimming / scanning

Other terms - which refer to which?

- sampling
- search-reading
- surveying
- focused reading



Answer

skimming =

- sampling
- surveying

scanning =

- search-reading
- focused reading



EFFICIENT READING STRATEGIES

What students reading the shortened version of the experiment text did is known as **attacking a text** – using it **selectively**, reading only the parts that are likely to contain the key information, and grasping the writers' point without reading every word.



- Reading selectively often follows the SQRRR technique:



SQRRR

Five stages for more efficient text processing:

- **Survey** (sample or skim the text, use abstracts, beginnings of paragraphs, conclusion)
- **Question** (ask yourself what answers you think the text will give you)
- **Read** (go back and read in enough detail to get those answers)
- **Recall** (put the text to one side and try to remember its main points)
- **Review** (ask yourself how sure you are that you have gained enough from the text)

Adopting or adapting the SQRRR approach should help you to find the **overall idea** of the text and the **thread of argument**.



Even if you later need to read intensively for further detail, skimming the whole text first is a good way to save effort:

- helps you to get an overview and guides more detailed reading
- enables you to identify texts that **do not** contain relevant material for your purpose, saving you wasted time



- But reading selectively is only the start of the journey.
- To read efficiently and effectively, you also need to recognise the common features of academic text and learn how to decode them.



OTHER FACTORS WHICH CAN SLOW DOWN READING: LEXICAL DENSITY

- ‘Many of the gold and silver objects excavated from the 3000-year-old royal tombs resemble items of jewellery still made today by craftsmen trained in the traditional skills’.
- (Swan, M. and Walter, C. (2017) Misunderstanding comprehension, *ELT Journal*, Vol 71/2. pp228-236)



WHAT MAKES THIS SENTENCE HARD TO FOLLOW?

- *“The assumptions that all sites evolve at one of two evolutionary rates (conserved and non conserved), that these rates are uniform across the genome, that sites evolve independently conditional on whether they are in conserved or non conserved regions, and that the phylogenetic models for conserved and non conserved regions have the same branch-length proportions, base compositions, and substitution patterns, all represent oversimplifications of the complex process of sequence evolution in eukaryotic genomes.”*



DISTANCE BETWEEN SUBJECT AND VERB

- *“The **assumptions** that all sites evolve at one of two evolutionary rates (conserved and nonconserved), that these rates are uniform across the genome, that sites evolve independently conditional on whether they are in conserved or nonconserved regions, and that the phylogenetic models for conserved and nonconserved regions have the same branch-length proportions, base compositions, and substitution patterns, all **represent** oversimplifications of the complex process of sequence evolution in eukaryotic genomes.”*



OVER-USE OF NOMINALISATION

- *The **assumptions** that all sites evolve at one of two evolutionary **rates** (conserved and nonconserved), that these **rates** are uniform across the **genome**, that **sites** evolve independently conditional on whether they are in conserved or nonconserved regions, and that the **phylogenetic models** for conserved and nonconserved **regions** have the same branch-length **proportions**, base **compositions**, and substitution **patterns**, all represent **oversimplifications** of the complex **process of sequence evolution in eukaryotic genomes.**”*



OTHER FEATURES THAT MAKE READING
DIFFICULT:
LITTLE USED DISCOURSE MARKERS

- What does ‘certainly’ mean in this context?
- *‘Certainly, several women loved him, and he was married twice. All the same, those closest to him felt.....’*



- If you are having difficulties reading a passage of text, highlight all the discourse markers, and delete the surrounding text.
- You should now be able to identify the writer's argument (the relationship between her ideas).
- Which are the points she agrees with and which are the points she disagrees with?



OTHER SOLUTIONS?

- Academic reading can be challenging.
- So, what can you do about it?



GOOGLE TRANSLATE?

Any other apps that you know/ can recommend?



E-BOOKS

Is it easier to read on the screen or should you try and find a hard copy; photocopy(5%)?



INTERTEXTUAL FRAMING

- Making connections with other texts you are reading to help to understand your text.
- Use secondary sources to explain the concepts in the primary texts.



ACADEMIC WORD LIST

- For technical words, you may just need to keep reading, learning the terms as you go (Native speakers will be in the same boat!)
- For words which are often used in academic texts, you can try the AWL
- Exercises and practice here:
- <http://www.uefap.com/vocab/vocfram.htm>
- <http://www.uefap.com/reading/readfram.htm>



YOU CAN ALSO USE A CONCORDANCE TO ANALYSE TEXT

- <https://www.wordandphrase.info/analyzeText.asp>



What other advice do you have to help read efficiently and effectively?



EFFICIENT READING STRATEGIES

You can also use your knowledge of different academic text *genres* to predict the structure and general content.



TYPICAL ORGANISATION OF ELEMENTS IN AN **ACADEMIC BOOK**:

- title page
- publishing details
- ISBN
- preface and/or introduction
- acknowledgments
- contents page
- chapters
- references
- glossary
- index



DISCUSSION QUESTION

What elements do you expect to find in an academic **journal article**? List them in order.

Our answer:

- title
- name(s) of author(s)
- author's institution
- Abstract
- Introduction
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion / Conclusion
- Acknowledgments
- Notes
- References
- Appendices



EFFICIENT READING STRATEGIES

Which parts of the text you read will depend on your **purpose** in reading.

Discussion question

If you want to find out quickly what the **main points** of an article are, which part(s) would you read?

Our answer:

- Abstract
- Discussion / Conclusion



EFFICIENT READING STRATEGIES

Discussion question

If you want to check what **specific research area** the article relates to, which part(s) would you look at?

Our answer:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- References



- **Critical reading**



- Critical reading is not necessarily looking for all the flaws so that you can write about the topic in a negative way; it is simply making sure that you have considered all sides of the argument.



CRITICAL READING

It is important to read critically. Critical reading requires you to evaluate the arguments in the text. You need to distinguish fact from opinion, and look at arguments given for and against the various claims. This also means being aware of your opinions and assumptions (positive and negative) of the text you are reading so you can evaluate it honestly. It is also important to be aware of the writer's background, assumptions and purposes. All writers have a reason for writing and will emphasise details which support their reason for writing and ignore details that do not.

Andy Gillett. 2014. *Using English for Academic Purposes* website
<http://www.uefap.com/reading/readfram.htm>



Being critical & balanced in your evaluation

Key points:

- Remember to **evaluate and critique** the sources used.
- **Don't just report** the information **without analysis**.
- **Don't accept** what writers state as **unquestionable**.
- Remember to **make clear** how **valid** the source is in **general**, as well as more specifically to **your topic**.
- Be prepared to **question** and, if necessary, **reject** information you have read.
- Remember **critical comment** includes both **positive** and **negative** points.
- Being critical applies to **all** writers of sources, **regardless of their academic reputation or status**.**



Assignments

Examples of key words in tasks that invite you to be critical and use your own critical understanding of the source materials:

- Discuss ...
- Comment on ...
- Assess ...
- Evaluate ...



SO, HOW DO I READ CRITICALLY?

- 1. Locate the argument
- 2. locate the evidence

- What counts as evidence in your field?



DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS YOU MAY WANT TO RECORD ABOUT SOURCES

Setting	Type of data
Sample size	Use of theory
Sample profile	Equipment
Follow up	Style of writing
Statistics used	Measurements
Methods	Sources of bias
Questions raised	Limitations
Main arguments	Intended audience



READING TO WRITE: ADVICE

- Pay particular attention to the literature review of a journal article.
- Students very often believe they are writing about the literature in a field to prove they know the field, and write:
 - Smith (2015) stated....; Jones (2016) argues.....Thomas(2017) believes
- In other words, they produce a laundry list of sources.



RATHER,

- Previous literature must be organised in some logically connected way.
- 1. Summarise previous literature.
- 2. Organise those summaries (chronologically; according to methodology; according to thematic category)



SYNTHESISE THOSE SOURCES

- While
- Whereas
- In contrast to V (2009), Y (2016) believes,,,



CRITICAL READING

Discussion task

Read through 'Critical Reading' checklists 1 & 2 and ask if anything isn't clear.

Critically read the two short samples from published articles. Are there any aspects of the texts you would question? Which questions from the checklist seem relevant?

Discuss your responses in pairs.



SAMPLE 1

Relevant questions include:

- What is the author's approach/perspective?
- Is there another theoretical or philosophical approach which might have been taken?
- Do you agree with the points the author is making?
- Are the points made by the author supported by evidence?
- Does the writer present opinion as fact?
- Does the writer make unsupported generalisations?



SAMPLE 2

Relevant questions include:

- Are the limitations of the procedures clear?
- Is the methodology valid? (e.g. size of the sample, method of sampling used)



ADVICE

- Know your reading purpose.
- ‘You are reading to build an argument, not a library’ (Rudestam and Newton, 1992:49) .
- Develop a note-taking system that works for you.



- <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/reading-and-researching>
- This site has many useful sections on styles of academic writing.
- [Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute: Center for Communication Practices](#)
- This site has a useful e-handout on writing critiques.
- <http://www.casp-uk.net/>
- This site is designed for use within healthcare, but many of the ideas are transferable more widely in both quantitative and qualitative research.



Where next?

ELE help

EL SIS – English Language Support for International Students

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/english-language-teaching/students/current-students/elsis>

- **Independent Study** materials (download):
Effective English Learning: Reading unit
http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/imports/fileManager/UNIT_4_Reading.pdf

Where next?

The screenshot shows the homepage of the UefAP website. At the top left is the UefAP logo with the tagline 'Using English for Academic Purposes'. A search bar is located at the top right. A dark blue navigation menu on the left lists various topics: Home, Accuracy, EAP Links, Grammar in EAP, Listening, Materials, Preparing, Reading, Speaking, Vocabulary, and Writing. The main content area has a dark blue background with the UefAP logo and title. It also includes the author's name 'Andy Gillett', the copyright year '© Andy Gillett, 2015', the last update date 'Last updated: 2nd December 2015', and a 'Follow @UEfAP' button. An 'About UefAP' button is located at the bottom left of the main content area.

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Writing about your Reading

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/referring-to-sources/>

SUMMARY

Read faster

- *Don't subvocalise*
 - *Read efficiently*
- = *Read strategically*
- *Vary your reading speed*
 - *Use knowledge of genre to predict structure & content*
 - *SQRRR*

Deal with new vocabulary

- *Use form and context to guess*
- *Think about possible meaning of familiar word in new context*

Read critically

- *Refer to checklists*



Any questions?

