For the college student reading is the most necessary and most basic skill. Discovering that words are symbols, that reading is communication of ideas, that ideas are organized into some kind of intelligible order, and that there are techniques for extracting the ideas and labeling their organization opens the door to a higher level of thinking and understanding. Understanding written symbols is as important in a mathematics class as it is in a sociology class. Therefore, students in every discipline must read efficiently and effectively.

Most college students don’t realize that it is never too late to acquire, or re-acquire, basic reading skills and thereby gain control over their reading. They can do so by learning the importance of reading for ideas, by making associations between what they already know about a topic and the material they are currently reading, by predicting what the author might say about the topic, by making connections and recognizing structure, and by defining purpose and understanding the author’s intent.

There are more similarities than differences in how one should read in various disciplines across the curriculum. The differences that do exist are the result, primarily, of differences in emphasis rather than in subject matter.

What, then, are the common threads?

There are three major distinctions one can make between high school and college reading, apart from the increased amount of reading students are expected to do in college. College students need to make connections and see relationships, understand the role of supporting evidence, and possess a repertoire of reading techniques that provide flexibility. This is as true for a course in Greek history as it is for a course in geology.
Organization and support

An active reader, like an active learner, gains knowledge by looking for answers to questions. Questioning leads the reader to an awareness of the author’s strategies of exposition and enables the reader to discern the author’s essential meanings, whether stated or implied, and to evaluate the author’s ideas critically.

Whether they are writing to inform or to persuade, academic authors express their ideas by making general statements or conclusions, which they support by citing facts and authorities and by reasoning from evidence. What are the most important ideas the author has about the topic and what other ideas are brought in to support them? What kind of support is it? Does it depend on the author’s logic, on expert testimony, on the experience of experiment, or on collected data? What about the supporting details? Are they used to illustrate, explain, define, or amplify?

The student’s ability to evaluate critically the author’s ideas depends on knowing how to 1) discriminate among ideas, 2) recognize the ways authors support their ideas, and 3) judge the value of that supporting evidence. Has the author proved what he or she set out to prove? What sources are used? Do these sources reflect any bias? Does the author rely on fact, opinion, or both? Are the arguments well reasoned? What kind of evidence is valid in the discipline?

In history, for example, such evidence is often an original text, such as contemporary letters that deal with the historical event; in sociology and anthropology, it’s usually interviews or systematic observation; in psychology, experiments and systematic observation; in economics, statistical data; in political science, documents and observed behavior; in the natural sciences, experiments; in mathematics, proofs. But in each field the value and utility of the writing for the student depend on the author’s close scrutiny of the evidence, accurate reporting, and analysis of that evidence.
Flexibility and skimming

The pressure of the large amount of reading called for in college requires the student to be a flexible reader. But many students – including the best ones – come to college with so little reading experience behind them that they don’t know how to be flexible. In other words, they cannot adapt their reading strategies to the material at hand, to their purpose in reading it, and to the time they have. Few appreciate the function and benefits of skimming. Hence, few dare to move beyond the laborious word-by-word habits built up over a lifetime.

There are two types of skimming. The first is skimming in order to establish context. In my opinion, this is the most valuable technique available to serious readers. In skimming for context, students quickly survey the total reading, looking for the topic, the key idea, supporting ideas, and clues to its organization.

Students are amazed at how much they can learn from five minutes thus spent. When they reread the material more thoroughly, their questions and predictions, based on the context, are in place. They associate what they are about to read with what they already know. They begin to read for understanding. The learning process is well underway.

The second type of skimming consists of skipping over unnecessary material, either because it illustrates something already known or understood, or because it is merely entertaining, with no substantive value.

The time saved in skimming simple material can be allotted to material that requires close study. The key questions here are: “Why am I reading this?” and “What do I need to get out of this reading?” Establishing purpose gives students the basis for judging the depth to which they need to read. It is this judgment that allows them to be flexible in their approach.

A student learning a new economic theory should closely examine the accompanying diagrams and work out every example; whereas the
same student, reviewing for an exam, should skim for context and closely read only what is unclear. A sociology text that gives many examples of a concept can usually be read more quickly than can a philosophical argument or the statement of a physics problem.

Legitimating skimming

Students normally report that they read everything word by word. Like most of us, they resist the notion of skimming – they don't want, or are afraid, to “skip” anything. Therefore students need to be told that they do not have to read everything in depth.

This point is not usually made by instructors. Yet, instructors speak with amazement, and some alarm, of the dutiful student who feels compelled to read every word of every assignment. Busy people have to read selectively so that they can read what they must in the time that they have.

Most of us who read often and who read a great deal of academic material do in fact skim. Otherwise, we would not be able to get through all the reading on our desks. This is true of other professionals as well. Many students, particularly those taking liberal arts courses, feel themselves in danger of sinking under the weight of their reading. Legitimizing skimming in these situations is the greatest gift reading instructors can give to their students.

Applying techniques

Questioning, evaluating evidence, and using a flexible approach are the three techniques especially appropriate to reading college material. How these techniques are applied depends on the reader’s purpose, and that purpose comes from understanding the place of the reading in the context of the course or discipline. For, of course, as different kinds of evidence are used in different ways in different disciplines, each field has its own vocabulary, patterns of organization,
and specific form of writing. However, in all academic work, readers must understand what they read and be precise in the use of their new knowledge.

Updated 6/01/02
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