



## SCANNING, SKIPPING, SKIMMING ... SKIMPING?

Scanning, skipping, skimming, and overviewing when we read can leave us fearing that we are actually scamming, or escaping our responsibilities as readers, or skimping, or overlooking or neglecting our work. Here are some brief definitions to help us make key distinctions:

**scan** *v.t.* **to move your eyes and mindful attention quickly over a paragraph or section in search of a particular piece of information, i.e., in search of the answer to a specific question.** For instance, you might scan a paragraph for a name, a date, a place, a definition. Similarly, you might scan for indicators of the governing question (e.g., "?" or "yet that does not explain") or the main point (e.g., "we can conclude that" or "in summary").

**skip** *v.t.* **to actively choose not to read a particular text or portion of a text.** Skipping can feel risky because of the concern that you might skip something important. Skipping randomly certainly carries this risk, but skipping intentionally is a far less risky judgment call. See the following section, "It's Okay to Skip...."

**skim** *v.t.* **to read quickly for surface-level comprehension or to get an overall sense of a piece.** Whereas in scanning your effort is to find a particular answer to a specific question, in skimming, your effort is to discover what question a text, or a part of the text, addresses and to get a basic sense of the writer's answer to that question, i.e., the main point. Skimming can also help you look through a text to see what function each part or paragraph serves (introduction? illustration? expansion of a point? counterexample? historical background? etc.).

**overview** *v.t.* **to get an overall sense of a text.** Overviewing might involve skimming to get a big-picture sense of the structure and substance of a piece.

The above terms and definitions are not to be confused with the following:

**scam** *v.i., v.t.* **to engage in fraud and deception for personal, financial, or political gain, or to give less than expected or required.**

**escape** *v.i., v.t.* **to get free of or break away from.**

**skimp** *v.i.* **to cut corners; to make do with an insufficient amount.**

**overlook** *v.t.* **to ignore or to fail to notice or consider.**

Scanning, skimming, and skipping are legitimate and powerful reading strategies when you use them intentionally and judiciously to direct your time and attention to what is most relevant to your purposes. These strategies are of course more appropriate for inquiry-driven academic and professional text than for, say, poetry, fiction, and literature generally. These strategies help you to reduce the time and energy you spend reading things that are irrelevant to your purposes, that you already know, that are repetitious, or that you could intuit or figure out without reading the text. You can then reserve a closer reading approach for those texts and those parts of a text that require your fine-grained attention because of their nature and their relevance to your purposes. Of course, even if you skim or skip parts, you might make a mental note of the functions those parts serve in the event that you later have some particular purpose for wanting to read those parts more closely.

## SKIPPING THE NON-ESSENTIAL ON A FIRST READING

It is possible to understand the essential meaning of a piece without reading every word of the text. In fact, we can omit much of the text and still grasp the main point and overall structure of its inquiry or argument.

The next time you sit down to read an expository (i.e., non-fiction) text, try the following approach for a first reading:

- Overview the first few and last few paragraphs of the piece to identify competing observations that are held in tension with one another and the guiding/governing question that the writer posed in response to those competing observations.
- Then read only the first sentence or so of each paragraph in the body of the text, as if the rest of each paragraph were masked. (There is no formula or rubric for overviewing, but, in some pieces, reading the first sentence or two of most paragraphs can give you a good sense of the links between ideas and therefore a good sense of the overall structure of the author's argument.)
- Write a brief summary of the piece.

You might be surprised to discover how well you can comprehend the essential meaning of the piece when you skip the non-essential on your first reading.

Is such a highly selective reading sufficient? That depends upon your purpose. For the purpose of grasping the essential meaning and overall structure of the piece, it might be sufficient. For the purpose of understanding certain points in depth, it would not be sufficient. Even if you want to understand a text in some depth, it is a good idea to read the piece selectively on a first reading and then reread it – or parts of it again. On the first pass, you can read for basic structure and meaning. On a second pass, you can read more closely those parts that address particular questions you are interested to understand in greater depth and skip or skim those parts that are less essential to your purpose. One student referred to these multiple readings as “reading in drafts.” Reading a piece several times, with different purposes and efforts, helps you to read actively and efficiently, with greater comprehension. Even when you think you have time for only one reading, it is probably a better use of your time to do two (or more) active and strategic readings than one passive, word-by-word reading.

### IT'S OKAY TO SKIP . . .

So let's assume that skipping text does not necessarily mean that you are *skimming*, and certainly not *scamming* or *escaping*. You still need to figure out *when it is okay* to skip something.

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| <b>IT'S OKAY TO SKIP . . .</b> | in the process of skimming, of getting an overview of the structure or content of a text.  |
| <b>IT'S OKAY TO SKIP . . .</b> | in the process of scanning, of actively seeking something in the text; for example, to find the answer to a specific question, or to figure out the main point of the piece. |
| <b>IT'S OKAY TO SKIP . . .</b> | repeated examples or illustrations when you already understand what they exemplify or illustrate, or when you can generate identical or equivalent examples on your own.     |
| <b>IT'S OKAY TO SKIP . . .</b> | when the writer repeats or elaborates on something you already "got."  |
| <b>IT'S OKAY TO SKIP . . .</b> | text which is irrelevant to your purposes.   |
| <b>IT'S OKAY TO SKIP . . .</b> | when you are reading something you already know well.  |