



WHEN I READ ENGLISH (OR ANY LANGUAGE WHICH FEELS NEW OR UNPRACTICED)

If you are new to the U.S., you are probably adjusting to many aspects of a different culture, language, and education system. If English is not your native language, you might face added challenges in your academic life here. Some common concerns expressed by ESL students about their efforts to read in English include these:

When I read English . . . *I often encounter words I do not know. I can skip over these words or try to understand them from their context, but even this takes time and slows me down.*

When I read English . . . *I have to spend time recognizing and understanding even the simple words (like "and," "the," "when"). I don't recognize and understand them instantly, as I do in my native language.*

When I read English . . . *I have no immediate or intuitive sense of syntax. When my eyes land in the middle of a sentence, I can not trust what the sentence has just said, or what it is about to say. I must read the whole sentence in order to make sense of how it is put together and what it means.*

When I read English . . . *It seems as though all the letters are just black marks on the page and they don't mean anything. It takes effort and attention to focus on each word and understand it; the words don't automatically offer their meaning to me when I just glance at them, as they do in my native language. This makes skimming very difficult.*

When I read English . . . *I understand words more slowly. Even when I don't translate the words into my native language (that is, even when I am "thinking" in English), I still need an extra moment to understand what I am reading.*

When I read English . . . *I sometimes find that I understand the words themselves, but their meaning is still very strange to me. The sentence says something that doesn't make sense in my own language. Sometimes this is because I'm not familiar with what an expression means, even though I understand the individual words. But I'm never sure; I don't know what's an expression and what isn't. I must always wonder whether I really understand. And sometimes I understand the meaning of a sentence quite well, but the meaning itself is alien to me because in my own culture we just don't think about things in that way.*

These concerns apply not only to students' regular course work, but also to their experience of the Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies. It can be difficult to engage in regular courses or the Reading Course when these sorts of concerns leave you feeling discouraged or stressed. The reading and study strategies you will be practicing in the Reading Course are designed to help you to manage your work and adapt to academic life in the U.S.

Interestingly, even students whose first language is English recognize some of the experiences described above when they are reading in an area of study with which they still feel unfamiliar

or unpracticed – for instance, the language of chemistry or philosophy or genetics or neurobiology.

Whether the new language in which you are trying to read is English or entomology (the study of insects), developing your learning skills and strategies will have a positive impact on your academic performance in the long run.¹ The Reading Course can help you along the path. As you interact with new and unfamiliar academic materials, even though it can be a struggle sometimes, your language and study skills will become more developed every day.

RESOURCES FOR ESL STUDENTS

[ESL Peer Consultation](http://bsc.harvard.edu/esl-peer-consultation)

bsc.harvard.edu/esl-peer-consultation

ESL peer consultants are available to students at Harvard College, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Harvard Kennedy School. As the website explains, a peer consultant can work with you on many things, including fine-tuning general speaking and listening skills in English; understanding local idioms; practicing rapid, idiomatic language; learning more about the United States and Harvard cultures; developing “small-talk” skills in one-on-one and group settings; and practicing for oral presentations for a classroom or professional context. *Some schools provide funding for students to help cover the cost of ESL consultation. Speak with a representative in your student affairs office to learn more.*

English Language Program of the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

gsas.harvard.edu/student-life/harvard-resources/english-language-program-0

Professional Communication Program for International Teachers and Scholars

bokcenter.harvard.edu/international-teachers-and-scholars

The Student Handbook for your school

When you are reading and writing in a language that feels unfamiliar to you, it can be especially hard to summarize someone else’s ideas in your own words. And so it is important to pay especially close attention to your notetaking to be sure that you do not use someone else’s words or ideas without properly attributing them or citing them. See the student handbook in your school for information on plagiarism and use of sources. Make sure you know and use the conventions for attribution and citation in your particular field. You might also refer to the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu), a publication of the Harvard College Writing Program -- usingsources.fas.harvard.edu.

Online ESL Resources

There are a number of online reading tools that might be helpful to you. For example, there are sites which allow you to paste any text into the application and provide you with immediate dictionary access - as you read, you double-click on any word you don't know and you are directed to the definition. By asking your fellow-students, teachers, and librarians, and by browsing the internet yourself, you can find other online resources on topics such as cultural adjustment, English idioms, situation-specific vocabulary, etc.

¹ C.F. Abel, “Academic Success and the International Student: Research and Recommendations,” in *Internationalizing Higher Education: Building Vital Programs on Campuses*, ed. B.W. Speck and B.H. Carmical (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 13-20.