

The object of this activity is to create a “big picture,” a map of the task and text you are facing. Work through the questions below and jot down a few notes for each section. Don’t get stuck on any one question; these are all things to keep in mind, but you won’t necessarily need to answer each question for everything you read.

Previewing: Where in the world is this country?

Determine what it is you are reading: what do you already know about the who, what, where, when and why:

- Who is the author? Is the author credible? What else can I discover about the author (reading the introductory material, searching the internet, etc.)
- What form does the text take? Book, chapter, web page journal article?
- Where was text published? A scholarly journal, a reputable web site?
- When was it published? Do I need to know historical context? Is it new research?
- Why was it written? What do the author’s purposes seem to be? Does she seem to have an agenda I should be aware of?
- Why am I reading it?

Ask yourself what you already know about the topic. This might be another series of who, what, where, when, why:

- Who else have I heard talking about this topic? Who are the major players in this subject area?
- What else have I read about this topic? What do I already know? What questions do I want answered?
- Where does this topic fit in with the course I am taking, the paper I am writing, or the subject I am learning about?
- Why does it seem likely that I will need to know what is in this text?

If there are references, read the citations to see what kind of sources the author cites and ask yourself what field the article seems situated in, or what disciplines of areas of study it seems to draw on for authority and evidence.

Why are you reading this piece?

Skimming: What are the borders and major landmarks?

Scan the text to determine its structure. If you can see its organization or structure before you start reading closely, it will help you fit each section in to your evolving comprehensions, which will make the close reading more efficient.

- Does the reading have chapters or subsections? Are their headings and subheadings that can help you see the organization?
- Do you see phrases that indicate the internal organization of the piece, like on the other hand, therefore, the next thing to consider is, or similar transitional expressions?

Read the abstract, the executive summary, and/or the introduction: what do you predict the writer’s main idea or thesis will be?

- The thesis or main idea of an argument in academic writing is often found at the end of an introduction or an introductory paragraph.
- The writer may even signal that he is about to express the main ideas, with phrases like I will argue that, or the hypotheses are.

Skimming: What are the borders and major landmarks?

Create a map of the piece by searching for major landmarks.

- Read the table of contents (for a book) or ...
- ...any heading and subheadings within the text (for chapters or articles) or,
- ...if it is a very short piece, read the first (but only the first) sentence of the sections or paragraphs.

Read the conclusion, or the findings or discussions section, if there is one, to discover where the writer hopes you will end up at the end of your journey.

Predicting: What do you expect to find during your journey through this text?

Write down the questions that occur to you as you preview and skim.

Make predictions about what the piece will do, what kinds of evidence it will use, and whether or not you are likely to be skeptical or accepting as you read.

Ask yourself what you will do next:

- Do I want to keep reading?
- How will reading this help me achieve my purpose?
- What reading strategies can I use, when I now read more closely, that will help me comprehend and critique a text like this one?

After you have taken these pre-reading steps, you will have created a “big picture,” or a map, of the reading you are about to do, and you will find that the second phase, the line-by-line reading, will be much more efficient and perhaps even easier and faster than if you had dived right in, because you know where you are going and how you might get there.

(You may have also saved yourself some time by deciding NOT to read the piece after all!)

The Writer’s Hopes & the Readers’ Expectations

Good writers will try to use organizational and textual cues to steer their readers through their argument. They want to be persuasive, and they want you to arrive at approximately the same place as they did – to share their understanding of the material or to be persuaded by their argument – when you finish your journey through the text. So they try to meet your expectations, and even shape your expectations, with landmarks and signposts in the text. For example, a writer who knows she is writing for academics may very well put her thesis in the last sentence of her introduction because she knows that is where many academic readers expect to find it. She is helping her readers to navigate by meeting their expectations. You can use these types of cues, or landmarks, to understand what you are reading (or, perhaps, to critique what you are reading, as when a writer puts one thesis where you expect to find it, but then argues for and concludes with an entirely different thesis!) Keep in mind, too, that you can use the same types of landmarks when you are writing, too!
