Skimming and scanning

Teaching strategies for reading comprehension

Surface learning
Years 5–9
Transfer learning
Deep learning

Best for:

- Year level: 5–9
- Phase of learning: surface

Overview

Description	Students learn two complementary reading techniques: skimming and scanning. Skimming is used to quickly obtain the main idea of a paragraph, page, chapter or article and a few (but not all) of the details. It is useful when deciding whether a text is likely to be relevant and helpful for the reader's purpose. Scanning is used to quickly locate a specific detail (e.g. a date, name or a specific phenomenon) in the text. The reader does not try to gain an overall sense of the text. Skimming and scanning can be used together. For example, a reader might skim a text to decide whether it is useful to answer a specific inquiry question and then scan it for details. Alternatively, a reader might start by scanning for some specific details and then skim the article to confirm its relevance and appropriateness.
Learning focus (based on National Literacy Learning Progression)	**Processes** • navigate texts using common signposting devices such as headings, sub-headings, paragraphs, navigation bars and links (UnT7) • skim and scan texts for key words to identify main idea (UnT8) • select reading/viewing strategies appropriate to reading purpose (e.g. scans text for evidence) (UnT9)
Teacher preparation	When introducing skimming, clarify the purpose for the reading — for example, ask, Will the text help answer a specific inquiry question? What perspective does this text provide on the topic? How easy or difficult to read is the text likely to be? Is the text likely to be engaging? When introducing scanning, first decide on a focus for reading. This focus can be negotiated with students, for example, a specific inquiry question or topic. Select texts to use for modelling and guided practice. For scanning, consider selecting texts that are familiar to students. This allows them to anticipate more accurately where in the text they can locate the required information.

Suggested implementation

Skimming

1. Clarify the purpose for reading, for example:

   - to determine if a text will be engaging

   - to judge the reading level of the text

   - to evaluate whether the text will be useful for a specific research task.

2. Model how to skim using a chosen text. Refer to the poster in Appendix 1. Emphasise that it is not necessary to read every word.

3. Ask students to practise skimming another text.

Scanning

4. Clarify the purpose for reading, that is, what specific information is being sought.

5. Consider synonyms and related words that might assist in locating information, for example:

   - a particular person (e.g. character or historical figure) may be referred to in a variety of ways (e.g. by proper name, title, nickname or appellation)

   - causes of an event or phenomenon might be indicated by words such as 'because', 'as a result', 'in turn', 'consequently', 'caused' or 'led to'.

6. Skim the structure of a chosen text to anticipate where in the text the required information (words, dates, names or facts) is likely to be found.

7. Prompt students to notice how the information is arranged on a page. Ask questions such as:

   – Will headings, diagrams, boxed or highlighted information guide me?

   – Is information arranged alphabetically or numerically as it might be in a glossary?

   – What are the key words (and synonyms) and phrases to locate?

   – What can be ignored?

8. Model how to scan the text. Refer to the poster in Appendix 1.

9. Ask students to practise scanning, including using another text.

10. Discuss the differences between the two strategies and when each might be appropriate in reading.

Variations

Provide opportunities for students to practise skimming and scanning for varied purposes across different types of texts relevant to the learning area.

Further reading

For the application of this strategy in Mathematics, see Berger, M 2019, 'Different reading styles for mathematics text', *Educational studies in Mathematics*, pp. 139–223, doi:org/10.1007/s10649-018-9871-y.

Appendix 1: A process for skimming and scanning

Skim **Read in this direction** →	Scan **Read in these directions** ↓ ↘

1. Read the first few paragraphs, two or three middle paragraphs and the final two or three paragraphs of a text, trying to gain a basic understanding of the information.
 	
2. Pause occasionally to consider the structure of the text. This is especially important when scrolling through a webpage.
 	
3. Experiment with reading the first and last sentence of each paragraph (i.e. the topic sentence and concluding sentence).
 	
4. If there are pictures, charts or diagrams, glance at them briefly. This may help you to understand the main idea or point of view in the text.
 	
5. Generally, move your eyes horizontally and quickly as you skim; avoid reading every word.
 	
6. You know you have skim read successfully when you have a general idea about the meaning of the text and/or its level of engagement or readability.
 	
7. Practise increasing the pace at which you skim read.
	1. Preview the structure of your text, so you can anticipate approximately where you might find the information you are scanning for.
	
	2. Note how the information is arranged on a page. Ask yourself:
	  – Will headings, diagrams, boxed or highlighted information guide me?
	  – Is information arranged alphabetically or numerically?
	
	3. Move your eyes vertically or diagonally down a page, letting them dart quickly from side to side, and keeping in mind the exact type of information that you want. Look for closely associated words that might steer you towards the detail for which you are searching.
	
	4. You know you have scanned the text successfully when you have found the information you were looking for.