

Reading Comprehension: Getting The Essential Information

Becoming an Active Reader Critical reading and thinking skills require active reading. Being an active reader means you have to engage with the text, both mentally and physically.

- Skim ahead and jump back.
- Mark up the text.
- Make specific observations about the text.

>>> Skimming Ahead and Jumping Back

Skimming ahead enables you to see what's coming up in your reading. Page through the text you're about to read. Notice how the text is broken down, what the main topics are, and the order in which they are covered. Skimming through the text beforehand will prepare you for what you are about to read. It's a lot like checking out the hills and curves in the course before a cross-country race. If you know what's ahead, you know how to pace yourself, so you're prepared to handle what's to come.

When you finish your reading, jump back. Notice both what the author highlighted and what you highlighted. By jumping back, you help solidify in your mind the ideas and information you've just read. You're reminded of how each idea fits into the whole, how ideas and information are connected. When you make connections between ideas, you're much more likely to remember them.

>>> Marking Up the Text

Marking up the text creates a direct physical link between you and the words you're reading. It forces you to pay closer attention to the words you read and takes you to a higher level of comprehension. Use these three strategies to mark up text:

1. Highlight or underline key words and ideas.

When you highlight or underline key words and ideas, you are identifying the most important parts of the text. Since you can't highlight or underline everything, you have to distinguish between the facts and ideas that are most important (major ideas) and those facts and ideas that are helpful but not so important (minor or supporting ideas).

2. Circle and define any unfamiliar words or phrases.

If possible, don't sit down to read without a dictionary by your side. It is not uncommon for the meaning of an entire sentence to depend on the meaning of a single word or phrase, and if you don't know what that word or phrase means, you won't understand the sentence. Besides, this habit enables you to expand your vocabulary, so you'll be a more confident reader and speaker. If you don't have a dictionary, try to determine the meaning of the word as best you can from its context—that is, the words and ideas around it. Then, make sure you look up the word as soon as possible so you're sure of its meaning.

3. Record your reactions and questions in the margins.

Recording your questions and reactions in the margins turns you from a passive receiver of information into an active participant in a dialogue. You can also use your mobile as a recording device!!! You will get much more out of the ideas and information you read about if you create a "conversation" with the writer.

>>> Making Observations

Good readers know that writers use many different strategies to express their ideas. Even if you know very little about those strategies, you can make useful observations about what you read to better understand and remember the author's ideas.

Advice

The first step in increasing your reading comprehension is to learn how to get the basic information. Like a good detective, start with the basic facts. To get the facts, be an active reader and look for clues as you read.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are a detective. You have just been called to the scene of a crime; a house has been robbed. What's the first thing you should do when you arrive?

- a. See what's on the TV. b. Check what's in the fridge. c. Get the basic facts of the case.

The answer, of course, is _____, get the basic facts of the case: the who, what, when, where, and how. What happened? To whom? When? Where? How did it happen? As a reader faced with a text, you go through a similar process. The first thing you should do is establish the facts. What does this piece of writing tell you? What happens? To whom? When, where, and how? If you can answer these basic questions, you're on your way to really comprehending what you read. Last but not the least... You'll work on answering the more difficult question— "Why did it happen?"

What Are the Facts? Let's start with a definition. A fact is

- something that we know for certain to have happened.
- something that we know for certain to be true.
- something that we know for certain to exist.

Much of what you read, especially today in this "Information Age," is designed to provide you with facts. You may read, for example, about a new school procedure that you must follow; about how the new computer system works; or about what happened at the students meeting. If you're taking a standardized test, you'll probably have to answer reading comprehension questions that ask about the facts in a reading passage. These facts are not always easy to determine, especially if the writing is dense or complicated. To make it simpler, ask yourself these questions as you read: What facts am I expected to know? What am I to learn or be aware of? What happened? What is true? What exists?

Practice Passage 1

Jump right into the task of finding facts. The following brief passage is similar to something you might see in a newspaper. Read the passage carefully, and then answer the questions that follow. Remember, careful reading is active reading (see the Introduction), so mark up the text as you go. Underline key words and ideas; circle and define any unfamiliar words or phrases; and record your reactions and questions in the margins.

Text

On Friday, October 21, at approximately 8:30 a.m., Judith Reynolds, owner of The Cupcake Factory, arrived at her establishment to find that it had been robbed and vandalized overnight. The front window of the shop at 128 Broad Street was broken, and chairs and tables were overturned throughout the café area. Additionally, the cash register had been pried open and emptied of money. The thieves attempted to open the safe as well, but were unsuccessful. Ms. Reynolds used her cell phone to report the crime to the police. She also phoned the proprietor of Primo Pizza, located at 130 Broad Street, as she noticed that the door of that restaurant showed signs of forced entry. The police department is asking anyone with information to call 555-2323.

★ Remember, good reading is active reading. Did you mark up the passage? If so, it may have looked something like this: ★