Guidelines for Skimming

Skimming helps you follow the writer’s train of thought and get the main ideas. Try to filter out extended discussions, extra examples, and supporting details. While there is no foolproof method for what to read and what to skip, here are some general guidelines.

1. **Read the introductory material in a chapter.** The extent of introductory material varies from book to book. It may be just a paragraph, or it can be a page or more.

2. **Read the first sentence or two of the remaining paragraphs.** Do this in an attempt to determine the topic sentence (the sentence containing the main idea of the paragraph), which is often at the beginning of the paragraph.

3. **Read a sentence that contains a key concept word from either the book as a whole or from the specific chapter.** Read such a sentence regardless of where it appears in the paragraph - beginning, middle, or end.

   **Key Concept** words are the words that are particularly important to the writer, because they express the main ideas. These words can be common words used in special ways by the writer, or they can be uncommon words.

   A reader needs to note what special meaning for any of these words.

4. **Read sentences containing signal words.** Again, read these sentences, no matter where they appear in the paragraph.

   A **signal word** indicates emphasis, a shift in thought, or a connection between one idea and another. It helps the writer follow the train of thought or connect the main ideas, giving a pattern to the writing.

   An example of a signal word is a word that indicates a particular item in a list or place among units, such as **one, the other, another, the next**.

   These **signal words** indicate **time order**:
   - First, second, etc.
   - Before, after
   - Then, last, finally
   - At the same time

   These **signal words** indicate **cause and effect**:
   - because, the cause, so
   - as a consequence, the effect, the result
   - therefore

   These **signal words** indicate **contrast**:
   - in contrast, on the other hand
   - in comparison, the difference
   - yet, however, but, therefore, nevertheless, conversely
Often **signal words** come at the beginning of a sentence, or at the beginning of the second part of a compound sentence (a sentence containing two independent clauses joined by a connective word such as **but, yet, or however**; for example, “Read the principle, **but** skip the illustration.”). This makes spotting them a little easier.

A small yet very significant **signal word** is the word “**not**.” It can appear almost anywhere in a sentence, so it may be a little more difficult to spot. Since “not” signals the opposite or negation, it can affect the entire thrust of an idea. When skimming, watch for the word “not,” and read any sentence in which it appears.

### HOW TO SKIM

**To skim systematically, follow these steps:**

1. **Prepare yourself.** Know the key concept words for the book (found by analyzing the book) and for the chapter (found by previewing the chapter). Know the topics and general sequence of the chapter.

2. **Use your hand as a guide.** Combine the following pacing and scanning motions:
   - Pace underneath the first sentence or two of paragraphs;
   - Then pull your hand in back-and-forth diagonal lines down through the paragraph.

   The diagonal motion helps you scan, as you pass over material quickly until you spot a target item. Then pause to read material containing the target. For skimming to follow the train of thought, the diagonal motion moves you away from reading straight through an entire paragraph. Instead, it allows you to spot key words. Stop and read sentences containing the key word. When a key concept word appears in the middle of a sentence, return to the beginning of that sentence to get the full thought.

*(Adapted from the Learning Resources Center at Hudson Valley Community College, Troy, NY)*