

How to Understand More of What You Read

There are many things you **can** do that will give you a better chance of understanding what you read. Here are some suggestions:



1. Know your reading purpose - The way you read a book or a text depends very much on your *reasons* for reading it. This is why it is so important to know your reading purpose. You should read a question in your math exam differently from a poem you read for fun. The kind of reading you do in class or for your homework is different from how you read a novel for pleasure during vacation.

If you know your reading purpose - perhaps by looking first at the questions you must answer after reading - you can choose the best reading method.

If your teacher gives you something to read and doesn't tell you what you need to find out from the text or what you will do after the reading, ask her (or him)!



2. Choose the appropriate reading speed - ESL students often take a long time to do their work because they read everything slowly and carefully. Often, however, one of the following speedreading methods will be the best choice:

- **Skimming** - this is reading a text quickly to find out what information it contains. You should skim when, for example, you want to check if a text has the information you need to answer some questions or write a project. It is often enough to look at the first (and last) sentences in each paragraph.
- **Scanning** - this is reading quickly to find a specific piece of information. You should scan when, for example, you are looking for the answer to a question which you know is in the text.

In general, students should be trying to increase their reading speed. (Go to this website: <http://esl.fis.edu/learners/read/index.htm> to try some speed reading practice!)



3. Get background information - Find something out about the topic you have to read. The more background information you have, the easier it will be to understand the text. You can get this background information background in your own language. For example, if you are studying life cycles in science, you could read online or in a book *in your own language*

to find out the most important details about life cycles. Your parents may also be able to give you useful background information. Talk to them in your language.

You can sometimes get background information from the text itself. Many writers include a conclusion or summary; if you read this first, it may give you a good start.



4. Use all the information in the book - Good nonfiction books are well-organized, with titles, sub-titles, introductions, summaries or conclusions. Many books also have pictures with captions. Look at all these first before starting to read.

Another aspect of good writing is that each paragraph has a topic sentence. A topic sentence is a sentence, usually the first one in a paragraph, that contains the main idea of the paragraph. If you concentrate on understanding the topic sentence, this may help you to understand what comes next.



5. Increase your vocabulary - Of course, reading itself is an excellent way to improve your vocabulary, but there are many other things you can do. The better your vocabulary, the easier you will find your reading. Check out this website for tips on increasing your vocabulary: <http://esl.fis.edu/learners/advice/vocab.htm>



6. Use your dictionary sensibly - A common mistake of ESL students is to look up *each* unknown word in the texts they are given to read. Occasionally this is necessary - for example, when reading test questions. But it takes a long time and can be very draining. It can even make understanding more difficult because by the time you reach the end of the paragraph you have forgotten what you read at the beginning! Go to this website to learn how and when to use your dictionary: <http://esl.fis.edu/learners/advice/dic.htm>



7. Learn the important words that organize text - When you read texts in your science or history books, you will find that most good writers organize their writing with *transition words*. These are words that connect different parts of the writing and help writers structure their thoughts. If you learn the important transition words, you will find it easier to understand the text.

Here are some important transition words: *also, therefore, except, unless, however, instead, (al)though, furthermore, moreover, nevertheless, on the other hand, as a result, despite, in conclusion.*



8. Choose the right place to read - You can't really expect to understand a difficult book if you are trying to read in the same room with the television on and your little brother distracting you. You also can't expect to read a textbook and listen to YouTube videos at the same time. Try to find a quiet and comfortable place with good light, with your dictionary or bilingual glossary nearby.



9. Choose the right time to read - If you have a difficult text to read for homework, it's probably best to do this first. If you leave it until last when you are tired, you will find it even more difficult.

Important: If you have tried the advice above and you still cannot understand a text, then ask someone to help you (your ESL teacher, for example!). You might be surprised at how many people are willing to help you, if you just ask.

What to Read

Most of the time you have to read what your teachers tell you to read. But as you know, reading is an excellent way to improve your English, and so you should try to do some extra reading each week. Here is some advice on how to choose what to read:

- **Try not to read something too difficult** - There should be no more than about 6-10 new words per page; reading for pleasure should not be hard work!
- **Reading easy books is good for you** -You will improve your reading skills even if you read simple books, as long as you read *lots of* them. (But you may find you don't really enjoy stories written in English that has been over-simplified.)
- **Try to read some non-fiction** - Reading non-fiction books or magazines will help you learn some of the words you need to do well in your subject classes. There are millions of pages of non-fiction on the internet!
- **Choose something that is interesting to you** - This is clear. In fact, if you are really interested in a topic, you will probably be able to understand texts that would normally be too difficult for you.
- **Surf the internet** - You can learn a lot of English just by surfing around on the websites that interest you. This is particularly true if the webpages contain pictures that help you understand the writing. Be sure to stay safe online with parental guidance.

