Reading techniques

Skimming

Skim reading is a useful and quick technique that you can use to gain an overview of the material that you are looking at. Remember that it won’t replace proper reading.

Skim reading is a bit like when you ‘skim’ a pebble across water, you are lightly hitting the surface.

- First of all think about what it is that you are trying to find out.
- The main aim of skimming is to find out what the central ideas of the document are and how they relate to the topic that you are studying.
- Skim the first sentences of paragraphs for keywords related to your research.
- You don’t need to read carefully and in-depth, you are trying to get a feel for the content.
- Take a look at the paragraphs at the start and end of chapters.
- Skimming will also alert you how the item is structured and where to begin more detailed reading.

Scanning

Scanning is similar to skimming, but it is more focused.

During skimming we are getting an overall feel for the item, scanning is about examining a particular part of the text for information relating to your subject. Scanning can be non-linear, skimming is more likely to be systematic and linear in approach.

Areas to scan:

- The title of the item—does the title relate to what you are looking at. In some instances titles can be misleading, so it is important not to disregard something just because of the title.
- The book jacket—the back and inside the front cover. It should tell you a bit about the book, what the book is about and also provide some information about the author. Over time some authors will become familiar to you as experts in their field.
- Publication date—when was the book published? This information is found on the back of the title page. Ask yourself does it matter when the book was published?
- Table of contents—the table of contents gives you the chapter headings and page numbers. What do these look like and how many pages does each chapter cover?
- Chapter headings—some books will summarise the content of each chapter, it is worth looking at these to see if a chapter will be useful. If a chapter is broken down into sections with headings have a quick look at these as they may also provide clues about content.
• Index—the index can be found at the back of the book and is a list of topics covered, it should give you clues to the content of the book. Use the index to search for your topic. If you are using an electronic book you can use the search facility to find information.

• Bibliography—the bibliography shows you material that the author has used in their research while writing the book. If you want to do further research on a topic covered in the item that you are looking at then the bibliography can point you in the direction of related material.

• Tables and illustrations—if these are included do they look helpful and support the text?

If the item is a journal article

• Have a look at the abstract - the abstract summarises the material in the article so will give you clues about the content of the article.