4-Step Reading Process

The length and content of an academic article can sometimes seem daunting or overwhelming. You can learn to read more efficiently—to understand the content better and more quickly—by following this four-step reading process:

1. Preview
2. Read for Meaning
3. Grasp Paragraph Sense
4. Organize Facts

It might look like more work than simply reading through from start to finish, but many students find that investing that effort reduces confusion and frustration, and that they feel better prepared to discuss readings when they use this method. Let’s take it one step at a time.

1. Preview

The first step is to see the article as a whole and get an overall sense for what it’s about. To preview, do the following, in order:

- **Read the title** and see what you can learn from it, beyond just the topic being discussed. What does the title make you think about? What do you already know about this subject? Can you tell what the author wants you to think or feel about it?

- **Read the introduction** or first paragraph (or even just a few sentences, if it’s long). This is where the author usually invites you into the article in some way. Pay attention to how they want you to enter the text. Do they announce their intent or argument? Do they present a provocative question? Do they hint at what the rest of the article will say or do?

- **Read the conclusion** or last paragraph (or even the last few sentences, if it’s long). This is the author’s last opportunity to make an impact. They might reiterate their main idea, summarize key points, or draw new connections. What does this author want you to know and continue thinking about?

- **Scan for clues** about what kinds of content you should expect throughout the article. Are there sections with headings, or does it flow continuously? Are there lots of numbers, dates, and names? Is it descriptive, using lots of adjectives? Or does it seem like storytelling? What kind of focus, pace, and note-taking strategies will you need for this reading?

2. Read for Meaning

Focus on concepts instead of the meaning of every word. Shifting your approach in this way may make reading faster and help you understand a text better. To read for meaning:

- **Build concentration.** Losing concentration while reading is common; but it’s important to notice and correct yourself right away so it’s easier to return to the text. Set yourself up to read in a focus-friendly environment, considering noise level and distracting activities. Keep in mind the information you learned through previewing so your attention stays on the article content.

- **Read in thought groups** rather than word-by-word. Chunk text into word pairs or phrases
that have a natural relationship. Instead of getting slowed down by individual vocabulary, you’ll absorb words in these meaningful combinations faster and comprehend them more clearly. It helps to read aloud, at least until you get in the habit.

- **Question the author** continually as you read. This will help you stay engaged, maintain your concentration and pace, and strengthen your comprehension. At regular intervals, maybe after every paragraph or two or at the end of each page, ask yourself: what does this mean? What is the author saying now? How can I use this information?

3. Grasp Paragraph Sense
Paragraphs are self-contained units of meaning in a text. Each has a main point, and discovering that main point is key to understanding the author’s message. Here’s what to look for:

- **Topic sentences** contain the main idea of a paragraph. They are usually the first sentence of a paragraph, or sometimes the last sentence. Occasionally, there is no topic sentence; the purpose of these paragraphs is usually to set a mood or feeling. Look for the topic sentences and you’ll find the author’s key points.

- **Paragraph structure**: Every paragraph has a purpose — to inform, define, explain, persuade, compare, contrast, illustrate, etc. — and every sentence in the paragraph works toward that purpose. As you read each paragraph, notice how the content supports, develops, or explains the topic sentence or main idea. Reading with this attention to purpose will help you comprehend both what the author says and why.

4. Organize Facts
The whole point of reading is to get the big idea, to see how all the information fits together and understand the author’s main point. Organize content as you read, rather than trying to make sense of it all once you’re done.

- **Discover the author’s plan**, their goal and how they structured the article to accomplish it. Look for clues early in the text: if the writer says “there are three reasons…” then you know to look for three reasons as you read. More subtle clues, words like *moreover, otherwise, and consequently* can also signal the direction the text will go.

- **Relate as you read**: consciously try to connect what you read to things you learned from the preview. How does a piece of information relate to the title? How does it relate to what you already know about the topic or help you answer questions you asked earlier in the text? The overall message comes through quickly and clearly when you actively look for these relationships and connections.

With practice, these four steps will become your natural reading process. You can find more advice and ideas to improve your reading process in our Reading Habits and Annotation handouts.