



## Basic Skills for College Reading and Comprehension

By practicing the study habits detailed in this handout, you can improve your reading skills quickly. Focus on the strategies described here; practice and read a lot, especially information that interests you as well as challenging material. It's all about the investment you make in yourself as you read.

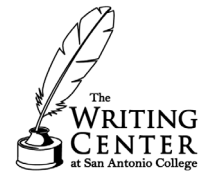
The following four study skills will help you improve your reading comprehension, writing, and course performance.

- A) Go to class and take notes, lots of them. Rewrite them as a study strategy.
- B) Understand what your professor expects you to know, and what you are expected to learn. Think about how your teacher understands ideas. Try to mimic this method.
- C) Strategize your reading: read the first and last paragraph of the chapter; then look over all the pages, identifying words that are unfamiliar to you, key terms, and definitions provided in the textbook. Read all that is required.
- D) Using the course syllabus, organize your study responsibilities, developing a calendar which you access regularly; keep an up to date "To Do" list of your assignments AHEAD of the deadlines or due dates imposed by your professor, and access it frequently, taking time, even in small increments, to work on your assignments.
- E) Seek assistance in the Writing Center, and other student resources.

Reading develops ALL your abilities with language, critical thinking, and analysis. Frequent reading improves vocabulary, spelling, reading speed, as well as strengthening your grammar and writing style. Reading can also be entertaining. Some of your favorite movies began as books – challenge yourself to read the novel on which your favorite movie was based - *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a good example. Reading regularly increases your academic AND job success. The better your ability to use and comprehend words, the more success you are likely to have. Reading enlarges your brain and your heart, demanding that you move beyond your own experience, to share the experience of others. When we share the universal experiences, emotions, successes and failures that make us all human, we are more compassionate to others – we find where we are alike.

What are context clues? Rather than looking at a word in isolation, look for clues in the rest of the sentence or paragraph. There are 4 types of context clues – examples, synonyms, antonyms, and the general sense of the passage you're reading. Context clues will save time when you read, but there is no replacement for a good dictionary when an absolute definition is necessary. Sometimes the context of a course will also prescribe meaning – if you're in a Psychology course, the context of the course often requires alternative definitions be used. Not all words will be easily supported by context, especially words like *correlation*, *entities*, *innocuous*, *lurking*, and *hygiene*.

- Words of addition include *one*, *furthermore*, *last*, *in addition*, *moreover*, *consequently*. Take a look at our transitional words handout for more examples of these types of words.
- Look for main ideas – ask questions: What point is the writer trying to make? What is the author's primary concern? Main ideas are supported by details, specific evidence – examples, causes, reasons, or facts. Think as you read, seeking **general versus specific details** in the paragraph. Use the topic sentence of the paragraph to lead you to the main idea, or rely on key words in the sentence to find the main idea. If you can locate List Words, you can figure out details that follow them.



- Look for words and phrases like *several approaches, three advantages of, five steps, a series of, some factors, and a number of effects*. There are many other such clues to be found in reading.

Textbooks often present the main idea in the first or second sentence of a paragraph. Verbally, a professor might sandwich the main idea between a series of introductory details; likewise in conversation, the main idea might follow all the supporting details. Another way that main ideas are presented, particularly in academic writing, is to present the main idea as the first sentence in a paragraph, with details in the middle, followed by a restatement of the main idea. Good communication makes a point, and details support the point. Outlining a paragraph or essay is also a good strategy in finding the main point and details. Major details explain and develop the main idea, while minor details expand and clarify major details.

Implied Main Ideas are suggested by details, perhaps never specifically state in a single sentence. In this case, readers must figure out the main idea by looking carefully at the supporting details. Ask yourself “Who or what are these ideas about?” “What is the main point the writer is trying to make?” “Does *all* or *most* of the details in the paragraph support this idea?” Look for List Words and words of addition to find the main point. Also consider repeated words in the paragraph as indicators of the main point.

Writers use 2 methods to show relationships and make ideas clear – 1) transitions and 2) patterns of organization. Look at both relationships that involve time, and relationships that involve addition. Review the addition words above, as well as the Transitional Words handout. Time words tell us *when* something happened in relations to when other things happened. In other words writers must make clear orders of events, stages of development, or steps in a process. Common words that indicate time include words of addition AND words that show time: *before, after, immediately, when, until, frequently, later, eventually, first, second, third, finally, now, last*.

Additionally, relationships that involve illustration, or comparison/contrast, or cause and effect allow writers to communicate specifically with their readers:

- *Certain types of habit are very common. For example, people may always start their day with a cup of coffee, or a trip to the coffee shop.*
- *Dogs howl for a variety of reasons, such as to respond to other dogs as they telegraph.*
- *Some beliefs are really myths, including the story of Emily Morgan delaying Santa Anna long enough for the Texans to hold the advantage at San Jacinto.*

Look for Comparison (how are things alike?) and Contrast (how are things different?) words to determine similarities and differences. Comparative transitions are used when writers show that a second idea is *like* the first one in some way. Contrast words indicate that the writer shows how two things (or more) differ in some way.

Paragraphs often show several patterns of development. Watching for definitions, examples, how things are alike, or how they are different, you will be able to figure out everything you need to know in a reading assignment.

This handout was developed with the concepts presented in John Langan’s *Ten Steps to advancing College Reading Skills*, fifth edition.