

Basics

Scanning a text means reading to find specific information like names, times and dates. For example, if you need to find the phone number of a business, you don't read every word on their website until you find it. You search quickly for the number.

Scanning is different to skim reading. Skim reading is reading quickly to get the general idea – see **Skim-read a text**. Scanning a text, on the other hand, is reading to find specific details. When you scan, you know what you are looking for.

The academic context

Scanning is an important academic skill. Exams often require you to find the answers to very specific questions. You will save time if you can find facts and figures quickly without reading in detail. Scanning can also help you to keep notes brief. This is useful if you need to use many sources for an assignment – say, 20 or 30 books. Being able to scan for key information means you won't take too many notes from each book.

Key features

- First, identify the information you need. Is it a name? A number? A fact? Or an unknown word which will answer a question? For example, your question might be:

What did Curie discover in 1898?

- If the text is long, identify a section which might contain the right information. Use the contents pages, headings, subheadings or indexes. For example, you might see a section called:

3.1 Curie's discoveries of the 1890s

- Decide on a keyword to scan for. If you are looking for the answer to a question, scan for a keyword from the question – in the question above, the best word is *1898*.
- When you scan, you don't read everything. Glance quickly over a section of text. Let your eyes move quickly around the page to see if you can identify the keyword.
- If you can't find it, scan for other possible keywords, e.g. *discover, discovery*.
- The easiest keywords to search for are numbers (e.g. years, such as *1898*) and names, because numerals and capital letters stand out. For example:

Curie and her husband, Pierre, jointly discovered radium when they extracted radium chloride from uraninite in 1898. The discovery was published by the French Academy of Sciences.

Challenges / difficulties

Scanning texts written in English is often quite easy if you are familiar with the numerals and the alphabet. However, it may be more difficult if your first language uses a different writing system and you are not a proficient reader. You might need a bit more practice.

How can I develop this skill?

Try scanning a piece of text and highlighting all the numerals. Then do it again and highlight all the capital letters.

Learning outcome

If you learn to scan texts for key information, you will save time and read more quickly.

Theory to practice

You need to scan a text about Barcelona to find the answers to some questions. Read the questions and the advice. Then scan the text for the answers you need.

1 What is the name of Gaudí's famous church?

You could scan the text for the words *church* or *Gaudí*.

2 What region of Spain does Barcelona belong to?

You could scan to find the word *region*; or you could scan for capitalized words, since a region is a proper noun.

3 Which sport is popular in Barcelona?

You could scan for the word *sport*, but actually it doesn't appear in the text. So this question requires you to guess the name of a sport and scan for it; or you could read in more detail.

4 Which city in Spain is bigger than Barcelona?

Here, you could scan for the word *city* or for capitalized words. You will then need to read a whole sentence in detail to check/confirm your answer.



Sagrada Família

Barcelona

Barcelona is the second largest city in Spain after Madrid. It is the capital of Catalonia, a large region in the north-east which borders on France. It is an important Mediterranean port.

The city is divided into two parts. The Old City faces the sea and is where the historical buildings, such as the cathedral, are located. A modern area, the *Eixample*, surrounds the Old City. Located here are other famous buildings, like Gaudí's church of *la Sagrada Família*.

Barcelona is one of the most important cultural centres of Europe. There are six universities and a number of other colleges. There are also several museums, including the *Museu Picasso*, and Spain's most important theatre, the *Gran Teatre del Liceu*. Barcelona is also the home of one of the world's most famous football teams.

Today, Barcelona is one of the most visited cities in the world. Tourists come to see the architecture and enjoy the city's busy lifestyle.

Ways to get more practice

- Scan business webpages for names, addresses and opening hours.
- Read film reviews to check the names of actors and locations.
- If you like sport, scan reports to check the names of goalscorers and the times of goals.