

Basics

If you skim-read a text, you read it quickly to get a general idea of what it is about. We sometimes talk about *getting the gist* of a text – understanding the message or the main idea. This is what skim reading is about. When you skim-read, you don't read for detail, and you don't worry about parts of the text that you don't understand.

The academic context

Skim reading is a very important academic skill. You often need to understand the main idea of a text but don't have time to read for detail. Being able to identify the main idea of each section of a text can also help you decide which parts to read again more closely. You need to skim-read for many typical exam tasks.

Key features

- Before you start skim reading, identify the type of text you are reading – is it a review, an email or a recipe, for example? At the same time, think about what you need from the text – for example, do you simply need a piece of information, or are you interested in finding out the author's opinion about something?
- When you start reading, look at any titles or headings. These will tell you more about the topic and purpose of the text. There are sometimes subheadings between paragraphs that tell you more.
- Read the topic sentence(s) at the start of each paragraph. You can then decide whether to read the rest of each paragraph very quickly to notice keywords and phrases.
- You often skim-read before you decide whether you want to read a text again more closely for details or specific information. For more about that, see ***Skim reading and close reading***.

Challenges / difficulties

If you have limited time, skim reading can be quite stressful and difficult. It is even more difficult if you know nothing about the topic. If you are familiar with keywords that could appear in headings, subheadings and topic sentences, you will skim-read more easily.

How can I develop this skill?

Give yourself a time limit to skim-read a text. Then make some notes and think about how much you have understood.

Learning outcome

If you can learn to skim-read well, you will save time and only read what is important and useful when you have limited time. You will be able to identify parts of a text to read more closely later.

Theory to practice

- 1** You have 40 seconds to skim-read the text on the next page. Read the advice in the bullet points. If you follow the advice, can you stay within the time limit?

Skim-reading advice

- You can see immediately that it is an email. If you read the beginning and ending, you can see it is very informal.
- If you then read the highlighted sentences, you will understand the overall message. Bruno will stay with Greg and Elaine when he comes to the UK to study English. You can see the purpose is to introduce himself and thank them.
- You can focus quickly on keywords in the rest of the text, but you don't really need to.

Hi Greg and Elaine,

I'm Bruno, and I'm 24. I'm really looking forward to staying with you. Brighton sounds like a great city and I can't wait to see it. I need to improve my English so much!

I live in Sevilla, which is a big city in the south of Spain. I live with my mum and dad and my sister Melanie, but I hope to go to university in Barcelona next year. I want to get an apartment with some friends. My dad is an architect and my mum teaches in a primary school.

In my free time I play all kinds of sport. I love football and basketball and I sometimes go diving. I'm going to study sports psychology next year. I love music too and I see live bands whenever I can.

Thanks for offering me a room!

See you soon,

Bruno

- 2** You have 1 minute 30 seconds to read the text. Read the advice in the bullet points below. If you follow the advice, can you stay within the time limit?

Skim-reading advice

- If you look at the layout (the text design, the title and the subheadings), you can see it is a formally written article. It could be an academic article.
- If you read the title, you can see it is a serious topic.
- If you then read the first highlighted topic sentence, you can see that it probably summarizes the whole text. It gives you an idea of the text's main argument.
- If you read the subheadings and the highlighted topic sentence in each paragraph, you can see how the text is organized and get a very good general idea of what it is about. You know that its purpose is to inform and make readers think about a social situation. You only need to read more closely if you want specific facts and details.

Global life expectancy in the 20th century

In the last 100 years, the increase in global life expectancy has been huge. Healthcare has improved, more people drink clean water, and diets are healthier. In 1900, only 50% of children born in the USA could hope to live to the age of 50. Today, life expectancy there is 78 years.

Male and female life expectancy

There is a noticeable difference between male and female life expectancy. For men in the USA, it is 73.6 years, while for women it is 79.4 years. Life expectancy is much lower for African Americans: 67.2 years for men and 74.7 years for women.

Rich and poor

Life expectancy has increased more in the richest parts of the world. Life expectancy at birth in the USA in 1900 was 47 years. In India in 1950, it was only 32 years. Today, there is still a difference. According to a 2006 report, disease and famine mean that life expectancy in poorer nations is around half that in industrialized, richer nations.

The future

Scientists and doctors believe that soon, living to 100 years will be normal. Although nobody believes that people will live forever, it is difficult to say what a natural life expectancy will be by the middle of the 21st century.

Ways to get more practice

Cover the title of a simple text. Skim-read and try to guess what the title is.