Effective Reading Strategies

The structure of texts

When we read, we are looking at the communication of some kind of meaning in a structure. Since writers choose to organise material in a particular way, we need to be able to see this structure in the text. In texts:

• ideas are built up from sentence to paragraph to whole text;
• ideas and concepts tend to be developed from parts or segments to a whole;
• argument can be developed by way of amplification (ie. when a proposition is stated in some kind of preliminary form, and then expanded upon);
• argument can be developed by analogy (ie. when ideas are developed by comparison with a similar situation), or the writer may use illustration (ie. exposition by way of examples);
• argument is usually either inductive or deductive. An inductive argument is one that begins with specific facts, and uses these to establish a conclusion, while a deductive argument is one in which the writer puts forward a general proposition, and then proceeds to justify it. Clues indicating the type of argument that is being presented are usually to be found in the opening sentences or paragraphs.

Understanding the structure of a text will help you to know how to read it. The two main aspects of structure to look for are:

• the development of ideas in sentences and paragraphs;
• the development of the argument.

Ways of reading texts

Skim reading

This is the strategy we employ when we want to obtain a quick overview of a text. We may:

• be looking for something quite specific;
• be wanting to get a general idea before putting effort into close reading;
• have already read the text thoroughly, and be wanting to recall the main points.

If you have any of the above reasons for reading a text, you will find it helpful to employ the following skim reading strategies:

• Read the opening paragraph and the conclusion carefully.
• Read the first and last sentence of each remaining paragraph to gain some idea of the main points.
• Look for words and phrases that act as sign posts to the main ideas or messages in the text, or that are clues to anything specific you might be looking for.
• Use a marker pen to mark out any items that you want to re-read, or refer to later.
Specific reading

This strategy is usually employed in conjunction with skim reading. It is especially useful if you are looking for specific information which may be contained in a variety of books, journals or articles. The process is one of search and discovery. It requires you to skim read, locate, mark and then return to close reading. When doing this across a number of texts, you will need to reference the materials as you proceed.

In-depth reading

This is the most essential of all reading skills. It involves reading a text thoroughly in order to comprehend the ideas and arguments it contains. In-depth reading is consequently much slower than skim reading, and you may find that you need to read certain sections of a difficult text more than once. When reading in-depth it is useful to:

- read the opening paragraphs and conclusion first. This will help you to digest the intention and conclusion of the writer prior to a closer reading of the text.
- go back to the beginning, and read through the whole text, marking out and noting:
  - key words and phrases;
  - ideas, facts, and data you think are important;
  - the structure of the argument.
- make sure you understand the writer’s main ideas and arguments, and the overall message of the text.

Critical reading

Critical reading is a further dimension of in-depth reading. Reading a text critically means that you do not accept what you are reading at face value. This does not necessarily mean that you should find fault with a text, but rather that you should question and judge the merit and worth of the information it contains. A number of inter-related processes are involved in critical reading. They are: interpretation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Whether you use all, or only some of these processes, will depend on both the particular reading situation, and your purpose for reading.

Interpretation

When we read critically for interpretation, we read to discover meaning in a text, that is, to determine what conclusions can be drawn about the various messages the text contains. Sometimes, there is more than one possible interpretation, and in such cases it is possible that our reading may be directed at the best, or most likely meaning. Interpreting a text will also frequently involve the processes of analysis and synthesis.

Analysis

This is the process by which we examine the way the ideas and messages in a text fit together to create the overall meaning. When analysing a text we focus on:

- identifying assumptions (ie. the hidden values that underlie what a writer is saying e.g. that everyone who cleans their teeth uses toothpaste, or that everyone is interested in Rugby);
- the structure of the argument (ie. the development and sequence of ideas, the relationship between ideas, whether the argument is inductive or deductive);
- the relationship between evidence/data and argument (ie. whether the evidence supports and
illustrates the argument, and whether it supports any conclusions that are drawn).

**Synthesis**

Synthesis usually occurs in conjunction with analysis, and involves the drawing together of the results of the analysis into a conclusion on which to base an interpretation or evaluation.

**Evaluation**

This is a process by which we establish the *worth* or *merit* of a text. Evaluation is a higher order process that involves all of the other processes described so far, i.e. interpretation, analysis, and synthesis. When evaluating a text we attempt to look at the ideas and messages in a broader context. We might say - this is a good argument, but is it worth anything, does it have any merit? We would then use our knowledge of the subject or field, or of competing arguments, to establish the *merit* or *worth* of the argument.

**How do we arrive at an estimate of merit or worth?**

- **First** - We use **interpretation** to discover the meaning of the text.
- **Second** - We use **analysis** to determine whether the writer has a consistent argument, and whether or not it is logical (i.e. whether it follows from the evidence presented, or supports the proposition or thesis that has been put forward).
- **Third** - we can put a **value** on that case or argument.

To put a **value** on a case or argument we draw on:
- our own knowledge and expertise;
- other knowledge and expertise (e.g. scholarly literature).

**Example of evaluation:**

An article has been written by a sports coaching expert which states that not eating or drinking during the four hours prior to a performance, substantially improves performance. You are asked as a professional in this area, to **evaluate** the article.

**Suggested Method:**

A. **Read** the article carefully to make sure that you understand what is being said, and to identify any assumptions or implications.

B. **Analyse** the article to see whether the writer has established a case. In particular, look closely at

- the introduction/body/conclusion;
- the use of evidence/data;
- the logical consistency of the argument (What is the starting point? Does the conclusion follow from what precedes it?);
- whether the conclusion is justified on the basis of the evidence provided (or does it go beyond the evidence?);
- whether there are any unjustified claims.

C. **Evaluate** the writer’s claims using your own knowledge and expertise as well as that of others.

- Does your own knowledge and research tell you that the writer’s claim is not justified, or could be disputed?
• Do you have evidence from other sources (articles/professional references/research) that contradicts, qualifies, or agrees with the writer?

Your evaluation, on the basis of A, B, and C, will put a value on the article. This might be:

• the writer’s conclusion was not justified by the evidence provided, or
• other evidence exists that shows that the ingestion of some food and water prior to performance is beneficial.

Texts and situations

Every text can and should be read in some kind of situation. It is the situation that will guide your approach to the text, and that will make explicit demands on the way you read.

The following table lists some of the situations and reading task demands that might apply to the nursing profession. Some of these situations, however, will also be applicable to other professions. Note that synthesis has not been treated as a separate category in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Task/demands</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory</td>
<td>Report</td>
<td>Comprehension/Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>Occupational Health &amp; Safety Documents/Management directive</td>
<td>Comprehension/Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Centre</td>
<td>Policy Statement</td>
<td>Interpretation/analysis/evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Ethics Policy</td>
<td>Interpretation/analysis/evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Scientific article</td>
<td>Interpretation/analysis/evaluation</td>
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Remember, the situation or context tells us what kind of text we are dealing with, and is the first signpost as to what we should look for in a text, and/or what we are required to do with it.

Improving your reading strategies

If you are faced with a difficult and complex text, or if you do not read effectively under normal circumstances, you can improve the way you read by being more purposeful in your approach to reading.

Think of reading as a three-stage process that consists of:

1) planning for reading
2) reading
3) reflection on reading

1. Planning for reading

Planning for reading will help you to give your reading a focus. It need only take a few moments, and can be done by asking a few simple questions:

• What do I want to get out of reading this text?
• What ideas if any do I need to take into the reading?
• Why has this particular text been selected (by yourself, or others)?
• Can I subdivide the text into sections to read?
• What has skim reading told me about the text?

2. Reading

Once you have developed a focus for reading, how you actually read a particular text will depend on the nature of the text. There is no one single approach, but there are some useful guiding principles. Where possible:

• identify the starting point of the writer’s argument - usually this will be found in the first or second paragraph;
• see if you can detect any assumptions the writer has made, or the start of a particular method of argument (ie. an inductive or deductive argument);
• identify important, or central, ideas (or any stated principles) in paragraphs as you read them (If there is more than one, try to work out which is the most important or central);
• determine whether the ideas are connected or developed;
• examine the consistency of the argument;
• evaluate the evidence that has been presented in support of ideas or principles, and decide whether the evidence is relevant, persuasive, and convincing;
• assess whether the conclusions are justified on the basis of the evidence that has been presented.

After you have read carefully through the text in full, as suggested above, make some brief notes on:

• your understanding of the text;
• your preliminary response to the ideas and arguments that have been presented.

3. Reflection

Think about what you have read for a few minutes, then consider the following:

• Do you have any unanswered questions about the meaning of the text? If so, go back and skim read and/or read specific sections again.
• Are there any assumptions you have failed to recognise?
• Are you sure you understand how each section of the text is related?
• Are you able to make connections between the text and other material you have read?
• Do you consider your conclusions to be sound and unbiased? Are they limited or unlimited?

If you have been asked to answer specific questions on the text

• Do you feel you understand what responses the questions on the text require? If not, re-read the questions. If you are confident you understand the text, see whether the questions need to be interpreted.
• Do you need to cross-reference your responses to the questions? If so, make some notes on other material you wish to use.

Finally, use your notes and reflection to respond to any questions you have been asked.

Case analysis

Introduction:

Case studies are used to test the ability to interpret real or factual situations. The particular situation
will determine what kind of analysis should be done. The most common requirements in a case analysis are:

- problem identification and problem solving;
- comprehension of complex situations;
- identification of central issues;
- deduction or inference.

You must decide what your approach to a particular case will be, and what skills you will need to use. To do that effectively, you must first read to **assess the case.**

*Case assessment*

There are probably questions attached to the case - read these carefully first. What are the questions asking you to do - understand, problem solve, identify, draw conclusions, make inferences? Make a brief note of what you think you are being asked to do.

*Read the case*

Your first reading of the case should be as follows:

- **Identify** the main features of the case.
  - What **knowledge/skill** is involved?
  - What professional **practices**?
  - Are there **people** issues?
  - Is there an obvious connection to a body of **theory**?

- **Locate** the case as precisely as you can in a **situation** e.g. ‘This case is about a particular surgical procedure’ or ‘This case is concerned with driver responsibilities in a car accident’.

- **Read** the case a second time for **analysis**. You are now reading and marking carefully. Your response to the case at this stage should be directed at answering the questions. In this second reading, you will, in general:
  - try to break the case down into its main segments or elements;
  - look for indicators in the text as to precisely what theory/ knowledge areas will help you with the analysis.

*Case analysis map*

- **Read the Questions:**
  Note any clues or indicators as to what to look for.
- **Read the Case: - First Reading**
  Identify main features.
  Describe the precise situation.
- **Read the Case: - Second Reading**
  Mark for indications of significant events, knowledge, people issues.
  If required, break the case down into segments or components.
- **Go back to Questions:**
  Select data/information from case for question.
  Draft responses, making any appropriate deductions/inferences.
  Integrate knowledge/theory in a final response to questions.
Example of Case Analysis

The following example illustrates the process of case analysis.

Question/Task:

As a consultant you are asked to identify the problems causing low motivation. Suggest solutions to senior management.

Employee Motivation

Fremont Corporation Marketing Department is in trouble. Productivity has dropped within the Department and employees there appear to have low motivation. The problem started when Sharon sent some suggestions to improve efficiency to the General Manager. Her section head, Mike, rebuked her for not going through the “proper channels”. Since then, he has required all communications to be directed in writing to him, but does not reply to any that have been sent. On the other hand, he issues instructions through the e-mail system only. Staff have had applications for transfer refused, and Mike has rigorously applied the rules on lunch times, morning teas and time off. Mike runs a “tight ship”, but productivity is falling, and his latest edict is that unless it rises, jobs will go. Experienced staff say they are looking around for other jobs. Mike is well regarded by his seniors, but there have been concerns about productivity.

Refer to the Case Analysis Map. In addition,

- identify the main problem, and note any smaller problems that have a relationship with the main problem;
- see whether the main problem needs to be broken down further;
- assess the problem through known theories/practice;
- generate solutions, justifying choices against alternatives.

Analysis

The above case is about a communications problem, but the subsidiary related problem is control. The communication problem specifically relates to two-way written communication. The control problem relates to a management practice.

In your answer you would need to examine each of the problems you have identified and use relevant communication and management theory to guide and justify a solution. If there are alternative solutions, you should explain the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Additional Information

If you would like some additional information about how to read texts, and also some exercises to help you to practise your reading skills, try some of the websites listed below.

The Reading Comprehension page (Muskingum College) Go to “Specific Reading Comprehension Strategies”.
http://muskingum.edu/~cal/database/reading.html#strategies

How to get the most out of reading non-fiction (University of Michigan).
http://www.si.umich.edu/~pne/read.a.book.htm
Reading Exercises (University of Victoria).
http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/elc/studyzone/index.htm

Reading Exercises (Gallaudet University).
http://depts.gallaudet.edu/englishworks/reading/main/indexframe.htm

How to read University of Illinois at Chicago.
http://www.criticalreading.com

Reading Methods (Sweet Briar College).
http://www.arc.sbc.edu/study.html