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How to skim

Below is something I wrote last fall for students in a course I was teaching. I thought I'd reproduce it here for comments and suggestions.

I got the idea for doing it from [Timothy Burke's very helpful essay "How to Read in College."](#) If others of you have suggestions you give your students for dealing with high reading loads, let me know. One thing I'd like to develop is another set of suggestions for reading primary source material, which would help students see that some different rules apply to the skimming of, say, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and a modern biography of Frederick Douglass.

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[Originally written 15 September 2004, and distributed to undergraduate students in an upper-level history seminar.]

To get through the reading in this course (or in any course for that matter), you will need to skim some material. Contrary to popular belief, skimming is not a less engaged kind of reading; arguably, it requires even more concentration and focus. But if you skim effectively, if you direct your full attention to the parts of an assignment that deserve the most attention, you can spend less time reading and comprehend more of what you read. Some of the brief tips below are also discussed [here by Timothy Burke](#), a history professor at Swarthmore College. I encourage you to read (or skim!) his advice as well.

All of these tips are based upon a fundamental idea, adapted from the book *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, by Joseph Williams. Williams argues that clear writing comes from thinking about how readers read. Conversely, clear-headed reading comes from thinking about how writers write. Your goal as a skimmer is to grasp as quickly as possible what a writer is trying to say. This means trying to sit in the writer's chair. Here are some ideas about how to do that ...

1. Always "pre-read" by skimming the titles, both for the whole work and for sections. When authors choose titles, they are attempting to do your work as a skimmer for you. Titles, ideally, boil down crucial concepts into brief phrases, and they can give important clues about a work's argument. You should therefore look for key words in the title. Then, while you are skimming, you can pay special attention to the parts of the work that bear directly on those key words.

For instance, today I have been reading *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800*, by our own Professor [David Bell](#) in the history department.

The title contains several clues. On the most basic level, it tells us that this is a book about nationalism in France. It repeats forms of the word "nation" twice, so we know that understanding those words is going to be one of our major tasks as readers.

But we can also tell more than that. Look at the dates, "1680-1800." We can infer from these that Professor Bell believes that the invention of French nationalism took place during the eighteenth century. As it turns out, this is a major argument of the book. He disagrees with histories or theories of nationalism that make it an ancient phenomenon; his dates tell us that he thinks nationalism is a relatively modern development. But he also disagrees with people who think that French nationalism burst on the scene only during the French Revolution in 1788 and 1789. The title asserts that nationalism was being invented long before the Revolution, which is again a major argument of the book.

We can learn even more from the title. Notice the words "cult" and "inventing." These are clues that for Professor Bell, nationalism is primarily a "cultural" phenomenon (hence "cult"), not merely a political project. And because the nation is a cultural construction, Professor Bell argues that it had to be "invented." These are also major arguments of the book. We are prepared for them just by looking at the title.

Before skimming, you should look not only at the title of the whole work, but also at the titles of subsections. Scan the table of contents. Find other key words. Make a note of whether some of the title's key words are repeated in the table of contents; if so, that means they will be doubly important. But also notice any new key words *not* contained in the title; those concepts will also be important in the book, but probably in a secondary way. When we look at Professor Bell's table of contents, this is what we get:

Introduction: Constructing the Nation

1. The National and the Sacred
2. The Politics of Patriotism and National Sentiment
3. English Barbarians, French Martyrs
4. National Memory and the Canon of Great Frenchmen
5. National Character and the Republican Imagination
6. National Language and the Revolutionary Crucible

Conclusion: Toward the Present Day and the End of Nationalism

"Constructing the Nation" reinforces our observations about "cult" and "inventing" from the title, and the repetition of the word "nation" in almost every chapter's title affirms that we will not understand this book unless we understand what Professor Bell wants to tell us about "nations" and "nationalism." The fact that "revolutionary crucible" does not come until the last chapter confirms our suspicion that nationalism was being built long before the 1780s. But there are also new words here--"sacred," "memory," "character," "republican," "language." Now we have some questions we can ask ourselves while reading: How do these words and concepts relate to the primary concepts that we have already identified? You should follow the same procedure when you get into specific chapters. What are the subheadings for sections of the

chapter? What key words do *they* contain?

2. **Look for main points "early" or "late."** Williams' book on *Style* encourages writers to place their main points either at the beginning of works or at the end, because this is where readers tend to look for them. He's right, and this is where skimmers should go for quick ideas about the main point of a book or article. The main points of a book can usually be found in the introduction or conclusion. Likewise, the main points of a chapter are usually at the beginning or the end. In fact, the same is true even of smaller sections in a chapter. The same is even true of paragraphs.

Reading is usually thought of as a linear practice. You start on the first page, and read through to the last page. But a good skimmer has a more non-linear approach to reading. We've already seen this by discussing how skimmers jump ahead to the titles of chapters before they have read a single word. In the same way, skimmers try to think more like writers than readers. And since they know that writers tend to place their points "early" and "late," they go straight to those places and look again for key words and lines.

If a book has them, start by reading the "introduction" and the "conclusion." You should read these sections carefully, even if you skim everything else. Don't worry if you don't understand everything yet. You're trying to do the same sort of thing you did with the titles--identify key words, concepts that come up a lot, and major arguments. Notice which key words and arguments in the introduction are repeated in the conclusion. You can bet the house that those words and arguments are essential for you to understand, even if it means paying less attention while reading to other concepts and arguments. Also, keep an eye out for obvious landmarks like "This book is about ..." or "I will argue that ..." Again, these are the sentences in which the writer does the job of skimming for you by boiling down his or her argument into a concise statement.

Take some example sentences from Professor Bell's book:

"This book is about the way in which the French came to think of their nation as a political construction and, furthermore, came to see the process of construction itself as a central task of political life" (p. 6).

"Much of the book will be concerned with this pre-revolutionary change." (p. 7)

"I will also argue that the dynamics that governed this story and made nationalism thinkable were principally cultural and religious in nature." (p. 7)

"By 'nationalism' I mean a program to build a sovereign political community grouping together people who have enough in common--whether language, customs, beliefs, traditions, or some combination of these--to allow them to act as a homogeneous, collective person." (p. 20)

In each of these sentences, the author is waving flags at us, trying to get us to notice

key points. Not surprisingly, they all come "early" or "late." All of them are from the introduction to the book. The first three sentences are the first lines of paragraphs. The last sentence is the last line of a paragraph, and comes at the end of the introduction.

So if we followed the "early"-and-"late" principle of skimming, we would have noticed these sentences. And we also would be able to compare them against our mental lists of key words and topics. The first sentence reinforces the idea of "constructing" or "inventing" nationalism. The second sentence reinforces that this happened *before* the Revolution. The third sentence brings up "religion," which we can connect with the word "sacred" in the title of Chapter 1. This tells us we should be on the look-out for connections between nationalism and religion in Chapter 1. And the last sentence gives us some new key words--like "sovereign political community," "enough in common," and "language," which we can be looking for as the book progresses.

Once you have carefully read the "introduction" and the "conclusion," you are ready to start skimming. But as you skim, you will follow the same practice. Instead of reading a chapter one page after another, read the first and last pages of the chapter first. Then proceed through the chapter. But don't read every paragraph line by line. Read the first lines carefully, scan the middle, and then read the last lines carefully. If an author puts important points in the middle of a paragraph, and the author is smart, he or she will usually give you more obvious landmarks like "My point here is ..." or "This suggests that ..."

3. Do not get hung up on things you do not understand. This is perhaps the most important part of skimming. Mortimer Adler and Charles van Doren call it "superficial reading," a term they mean to be "intentionally provocative." I wouldn't recommend their advice for every kind of reading you do, but it applies perfectly to skimming: *In tackling a difficult book for the first time, read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things that you do not understand right away.*

Pay attention to what you can understand and do not be stopped by what you cannot immediately grasp. Go right on reading past the point where you have difficulties in understanding, and you will soon come to things you do understand. Concentrate on these. Keep on in this way. Read the book through, undeterred and undismayed by the paragraphs, footnotes, comments, and references that escape you. If you let yourself get stalled, if you allow yourself to be tripped up by any one of these stumbling blocks, you are lost. In most cases, you will not be able to puzzle the thing out by sticking to it. You will have a much better chance of understanding it on a second reading, but that requires you to have read the book *through* at least once. [From *How to Read a Book*, pp. 36-7.]

Why should you plow ahead through difficult passages? Because otherwise you could get mired in arguments that are tangential to the main point of the work. Unless you survive these passages and get a view of the work as a whole, you won't be able to judge the *important* difficult passages from the relatively unimportant ones.

Fortunately, if you have been following Steps 1 and 2 above, you are already armed with ways to tell whether a difficult passage is important to muddle through or not. Do the difficult words and arguments contain any of the key words or ideas that you have gleaned from the titles? If not, leave them aside for now. Are the troublesome parts in the "middle" of the paragraph, chapter, or book, rather than "early" or "late"? If so, pass over them for now and focus on the beginnings and endings of the work.

Step 3 does not mean you should blissfully skip over *any and all* difficult passages or words. Far from it. Rather, you need to be able to decide which parts to wrestle with, and which parts to come back to. If a passage contains key words from the titles, then you need to understand it, whether it is difficult or not. If the difficult passages come up in the introduction and conclusion, there's no easy way around them.

But you have to choose your battles when you are skimming. Don't get stuck on difficult parts that are incidental to the larger points of the book or article. Instead, note these passages with a question mark in the margin. If you discover as you read on that these passages were important to the overall work, you can always go back to them. But in many cases you'll see that what seemed difficult at first becomes clearer as you move along. Or you'll discover that it was not essential to understand the difficult passage in order to understand the work as a whole.

In conclusion, skimming does not just mean reading faster. It means pre-reading and collecting key information from titles. It means starting at the beginning and the end of sections, the places of the work that are most likely to contain the major points. And it means making intelligent decisions about when to dig deep into a difficult passage, and when to move on and come back later.