

Be a Careful Reader!: Four Strategies to Better Understand What You Are Reading

When you are reading an article, book chapter, or story, you can use these four simple techniques to be sure that you fully understand the content.

Prediction. Before you begin to read the selection, look at the main title, scan the pages to read the major headings, and look at any illustrations. Based on these clues, try to *predict* what the article or story is about.

Now read the selection to see whether it turns out as you predicted! Stop at several points during your reading and ask yourself how closely the content of the actual story or article fit your initial prediction. How do the facts and information that you have read change your prediction about what you will find in the rest of the story or article?

List Main ideas. Stop after each paragraph or major section of the passage. Construct one or two complete sentences that sum up only the *most important* idea(s) that appear in the section. (Good summary sentences include key concepts or events but leave out less important details!)

Write these summary (main idea) sentences down and continue reading.

Question Generation. Look at the ideas that you have summarized as you read the passage. For each main idea listed, write down at least one *question* that the main idea will answer. Good questions should include words like “who,” “where,” “when,” “why,” and “what”.

For example, if you are reading an article about the extinction of the dinosaurs, you might list the following main idea: “Most scientists now believe that the extinction of the dinosaurs was caused by a large meteor striking the earth.” You could then write this question: “What event do most scientists now believe caused the mass extinction of the dinosaurs?”

Clarifying. Sometimes in your reading you will run into words, phrases, or whole sentences that really don’t make sense. Here are some ways that you can *clarify* the meaning of your reading before moving on:

Unknown words. If you come across a word whose meaning you do not know, read the sentences before and after it to see if they give you clues to the word’s meaning. If the word is still unclear, look it up in a dictionary.

Unclear phrases or sentences. Reread the phrase or sentence carefully and try to understand it. If it contains words such as “them,” “it” or “they”, be sure that you know what nouns (persons, places, or things) to which these words refer.

If all else fails, ask another student or an adult to help you to clarify the meaning of a confusing word, phrase, or sentence.