



Reading to learn

Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal

Help your clients become more effective by giving them the tools to get the most out of their reading.

Introduction

We believe that reading is a major tool of learning – whether books, articles such as this module or guide notes and so on. When coaching, you may say to a client: ‘Read such and such; it will ...’ The question is, how well equipped are people to learn through reading?

Let us give you an example.

We recently ran a development centre for eight participants who were required to read some preparatory notes prior to an exercise directly related to the business. The notes contained a number of facts, one of which was that all the people involved in the scenario were in the same building in Paris. This fact was crucial to the successful completion of the exercise, but two of the eight participants failed to register it.

Were these ordinary employees? No. They were honours graduates

in the second year of their industrial training, so they must be able to read. But had they learned to read for a purpose?

This module explores reading for a purpose.

Exercise

Let’s just try a little exercise based on reading a complex instruction. All you have to do is follow the instructions to come up with the answer.

If the third letter of the fourth word of this sentence is T, take no notice of the next sentence. Put the letter that comes next but one after P in the alphabet in the box at the end of this example. If you have not yet put anything in the box at the end of this example, write the second letter of the third word of the first sentence of this example in the box.

I am sure that you have successfully achieved the answer H. But how difficult was that, and what did you have to do when reading to arrive at the correct answer? I expect you will have used techniques such as focusing, understanding and carrying out instructions. You may have read the instructions more than once and made decisions about how you would tackle the task. What we are suggesting is that reading for a purpose is not a simple automatic process, but requires a greater level of skill.

Key learning points

- ◆ The difference between reading and reading for a purpose.
- ◆ Key steps to reading for a purpose.
- ◆ How reading with a purpose helps you manage time.
- ◆ Formulating questions that your reading will answer.

This is to reflect on it, compare it to what you understand already, and see how it compares and contrasts. Consider what new insights that gives you. Compare and relate one part with another, to connect it with your other knowledge and personal experience and in general to organise and reorganise it. This may be done by thinking, and sometimes on paper. You may look at it as stages or a process, or a table, or in some form of diagram, picture or mind map.

Review

In addition to focusing your reading of the text, purpose and questioning can save you time when it comes to reviewing what you have learned. If you have approached texts using these two steps, repeating them can go a long way to bringing back to mind the material you have read and get you started with testing yourself with the questions you have prepared.

Survey your notes on the article or chapter to see them as a whole. This may suggest some kind of overall organisation that pulls it all together. Then recap, using the questions or other cues as starters or stimuli for recall. This kind of recapitulation can be carried out in a few minutes, and should be done every week or two with important material that will be required.

There is a second form of review that it is useful to carry out when you have finished reading an article or chapter, and that is to review the material and process that you have been through. The questions you might ask yourself are these:

- How well do I understand this article?
- What questions do I have regarding parts that are unclear?

- What are my difficulties? Where can I go for help? What could correct this situation?
- What else do I want to learn in this subject area?
- What actions will I take when I read my next article?

Conclusion

Reading to learn is a highly active and demanding process as it goes much further than merely comprehending the words, sentences and paragraphs that form the story on the page. It engages the critical faculties and demands that the reader follows a process.

Trainer’s tips (Action based)

- Practice reading for a purpose to acquire the necessary greater level of skills.
- Set a purpose when reading to allow you to be selective.
- Have a strategy when reading for a purpose.
- Stop reading when you have achieved your purpose.
- Compose questions that you want to answer from your reading to help sharpen your concentration and focus and allow you to read with purpose.
- Skim the text to quickly gain an overview and identify the ideas, problems and questions being discussed.
- Skim to read more selectively and identify the elements you need to read more thoroughly.
- Apply your own experience to what the author is saying as you read.
- Compare and relate one part of the text with another and connect it with your other knowledge and personal experience.
- Consider why you agree or disagree with certain statements and consider alternatives.
- Rephrase an idea in your own words it will help you to think it through and process its meaning.
- Read an entire section before highlighting points. This allows you to see the development of the idea and, as a bonus, you may find the author restates their points more concisely later on.
- Re-read your highlighted points and make notes in your own words.
- Use key words and phrases for your notes.
- Record page numbers and sentences where information can be found in the original text.
- Reflect on what you have read to increase your comprehension and retention.
- Review what you have read and consider what new insights it gives you.

Mandy Geal ran her own software company before co-founding Learning Partners, a people development consultancy, in 1995. **Barry Johnson** started his career as an aircraft engineer before taking a degree in psychology and changing career direction to HR and training management. Barry and Mandy are Neuro Linguistic Programming master practitioners who use competencies in the design and running of assessment centres for development and selection, behavioural learning events and performance management. They also design and produce development guides for self-development and coaching.

- Telephone: +44 (0) 1276 29978
- E-mail: barryj@learningpartners.co.uk



Key steps

It is useful when reading for a purpose to have a strategy. Key steps in the strategy may be these:

- Have a purpose.
- Skim or overview the piece.
- Ask questions to get to your purpose.
- Read selectively to answer your questions.
- Recapitulate.
- Make notes of key points.
- Reflect on the information and ideas.
- Review regularly.

Purpose

For what purpose are you reading this module, and what do you want to get out of it? Setting a purpose is intended to help you to be selective in your reading.

This has great advantages, because when you have achieved your purpose you can stop reading. This saves you enormous amounts of precious time.

For instance, if your purpose is specific and clear – for example, to find a hotel in Ascot near the racecourse in *Yellow Pages* – once you have found it, you stop reading. Such targeted reading can be very rapid indeed, perhaps involving scanning 100,000 words a minute! Perhaps this should be called by its proper name, scanning. Because your purpose is clear, the scanning is fast and efficient. And you only read the information you need to read. This principle – of first establishing your purpose – focuses you on the main facts or main ideas, or figures or evidence, arguments and examples, or methods. Purpose also helps you select a reading method that gets what you want in the minimum time.

Skimming

We have mentioned skimming as a technique to identify the information that we need. Often we don't know where what we want is in the article. Scan the main features of the article – that is, the title, the headings, the introduction and summary paragraphs – to get an overview of the piece and to find out what ideas, problems and questions are being discussed. Scanning contents pages and indexes is a quick way of doing this.

Skimming should also help you find the central theme or subject of the piece, what it is all about and perhaps the approach or manner in which

the author treats the subject. This skimming should take no more than one to three minutes.

When surveying a chapter of a book, it may be advisable to set a time limit on the first pass through the passages you intend to read. For example, you might want to limit yourself to around 10 minutes to preview a chapter of about thirty pages where there are clear headings, sub-headings and bold type. Stretching the preview time will not usually improve its quality, and may waste time. Difficult or complex material may take a little more time, say up to 15 minutes. Again, the preview is done by reading through the various structural elements of a chapter, interpreting them briefly, and then considering how the ideas might fit together, which ones will be areas of focus, which ones might be read through less intensively, and how long the sections of the reading will take.

Questioning

Compose questions that you aim to answer. For example, when you received this issue of *Coach the Coach*, you probably asked a question about what modules looked interesting and which ones you need to read.

You might ask, 'What is my purpose in reading the module on reading to learn?' The answer to such a question creates both a focus and a motivation to read the module.

You may have asked, 'What do I already know about this topic?' Such a question activates prior knowledge, so what you read can fit into the knowledge framework you already have.

Turn the headings into questions to which you will be seeking the answer when you read. For example: 'What key steps do I go through when reading a *Coach the Coach* module?' The kinds of question you construct will depend on your understanding of a particular heading. Those headings that contain unfamiliar material will probably be questioned in a way that aims to clarify what they mean. For those headings that contain familiar material, however, a series of questions that aim to understand, examine, analyse or critique the content may be used. For example, and once again using the material above, you might ask, 'Why will I want to set a purpose?' or 'What steps are involved in my reading strategy?' This questioning helps us sharpen our concentration and focus, and permits us to read with the purpose of answering them.

Reading selectively

Skimming through the module will give you some indicators of what elements you need to read more thoroughly. Read to find the answers to your questions. By reading the

first sentence of each paragraph, you may well get indicators. Sometimes the text will list the answers by saying, 'The first point ...', 'Secondly ...' and so on. Sometimes you may have to read each paragraph carefully just to understand the next one and to find the main idea buried in it. In general, look for the ideas, information and evidence that will meet your purpose.

Read actively what you have selected to read. That is, apply your own experience to what the author is saying. Keep involved and interested by entering into the evidence, argument or process. Challenge the ideas, consider what the author has missed, consider why you agree with the things that you think you agree with, and think about the alternatives.

Remember that the aim is to learn, and for adults that is not a process of acceptance but a process of behaviour change. That behaviour change is what you require to suit your needs, not what the author is telling you. The written word that you are reading is often a starting point, not a definitive end.

Recapitulate

Having formulated your questions and read selectively to find the answers to them, now – without reading – talk yourself through the answers to your questions, using your own words. If you have problems, go through the material again.

Making notes

One of the main problems with notes is that they are often too long, containing too much information. When making notes from reading, you have the original material. The simplest way of making notes may be to highlight

sentences, phrases or words. A word of warning: don't highlight or underline the important pieces of text as you go along. Reading an entire section between headings before highlighting allows you to see the development of the whole idea, and you may reach a point at which the author restates their points concisely.

Instead of underlining or highlighting across the page, make a vertical mark in the margin the length of the number of lines you want to note. This allows you to continue to read without unduly interrupting your thinking about the material, but still allows you to capture those thoughts for later consideration.

On your second reading of the highlighted points, use your own words to make a brief note on the idea and its importance or relevance to your reading purpose in the margin or in a notebook. Rephrasing an idea in your own words often forces you to think it through and process its meaning. In this way, your later reviews of the material are actual reviews, rather than the first real reading of the material.

What is often required is just a memory jogger. Taking action such as writing notes reinforces learning. If you choose this method, make a brief outline of your questions and the answers you have found. The answers should be in key words or phrases, not long sentences. It is also useful to note the chapters, pages and sentences where the information can be found in the original text.

Reflect

Recent work on learning indicates that comprehension and retention are increased when you integrate new information.