How to Preview a Text

Owl: Welcome to How to Preview a Text, an instructional video on reading comprehension brought to you by the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab.

What would you do if you were suddenly dropped into an unfamiliar place?
Would you wander around aimlessly, hoping that somehow you will find your way?
Probably not.
You'd probably want to carefully explore and investigate your surroundings so that you can gather clues and information that can help you get your bearings and decide what to do next.

The experience of reading a new text can be similar to that of navigating an unfamiliar place.
Therefore, before reading you should explore the text first to gather clues and information that can help you get your bearings.

This is called Previewing.
Previewing involves surveying or scanning a text in order to create a mental map that can help you read more effectively.

When you preview, you look for signposts by doing the following things:
Scan for titles, headings, and subheadings
Skim the first paragraph or introduction
Skim the last paragraph or summary
Scan the first sentence after each heading
Skim the abstract (if provided)
Make a note of graphic aids such as figures, tables, charts, graphs, and images
Make a note of typographical aids such as bold-faced or highlighted words and phrases
Scan any supplemental material at the beginning or end of the text, such as chapter outlines, chapter objectives, discussion questions, or vocabulary lists

Previewing provides some great advantages:
First, it helps you evaluate a text in order to decide if it is relevant for your purposes.
This requires you to think about what your purpose is before you read.
For instance, if you're doing research on a topic, previewing can help you evaluate if a text provides information you need.
Second, it helps you read faster by identifying passages that you must read carefully versus those that you can skim or skip.
Generally, you want to slow down and read more carefully when a passage covers a new topic you know very little about.
contains complicated or technical material;

is cluttered with essential visual aides like tables, charts, graphs, and images;

contains a lot of new or difficult vocabulary;

or requires a lot of visualization or interpretation.

On the other hand, you may want to skim or skip material when a passage

is easy to read,

covers material you already know well,

or covers material that isn't relevant to your purpose for reading.

Finally, it helps you read better by helping you identify questions you may have about the text.

We'll address questioning in another module.

Previewing is an excellent way to save time and improve your understanding of a text.

Just like you wouldn't want to wander around aimlessly in an unfamiliar place, you wouldn't want to wander into a text without previewing it!

Thanks for listening to this instructional video on How to Preview a Text.

Visit the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab for more support with reading and writing skills.