

College Reading Skills

SECOND EDITION

KATHRYN A. BLAKE

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Kathryn A. Blake

University of Georgia



Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blake, Kathryn A.
College reading skills / Kathryn A. Blake. -- 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-13-150236-0
1. Reading (Higher education) I. Title.
LB2395.3.B58 1989
426.4'07'1173--dc19

88-23197
CIP

Cover design: Wanda Lubelska Design
Manufacturing buyer: Ray Keating



© 1989, 1973 by Prentice-Hall, Inc.
A Division of Simon & Schuster
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-150236-0

PRENTICE-HALL INTERNATIONAL (UK) LIMITED, *London*
PRENTICE-HALL OF AUSTRALIA PTY. LIMITED, *Sydney*
PRENTICE-HALL CANADA INC., *Toronto*
PRENTICE-HALL HISPANOAMERICANA, S.A., *Mexico*
PRENTICE-HALL OF INDIA PRIVATE LIMITED, *New Delhi*
PRENTICE-HALL OF JAPAN, INC., *Tokyo*
SIMON & SCHUSTER ASIA PTE. LTD., *Singapore*
EDITORIA PRENTICE-HALL DO BRASIL, LTDA., *Rio de Janeiro*

CONTENTS

Chapter 1 READING

1

- Ideas about Reading 1
- Ways to Approach Reading 2
- The Plans for This Book 6

part one the vocabulary skills

Chapter 2 USING CONTEXT ANALYSIS

8

- The Vocabulary Skills 8
 - EXPLANATION 8
- Definitions 8
- Use 11
- Methods 11
- Example 12
 - GUIDED PRACTICE 13
 - SET 1 CONTEXT ANALYSIS 1 13
 - SET 2 CONTEXT ANALYSIS 2 14
 - Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 16

Chapter 3 DEALING WITH SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS

17

EXPLANATION 17

Definitions 17

Use 17

Methods 18

Example 18

GUIDED PRACTICE 19

SET 1 FINDING SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS 19

SET 2 CHECKING CONTEXT 20

SET 3 CHOOSING SYNONYMS 22

SET 4 CHOOSING ANTONYMS 24

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 25

Core Words for Further Study 27

Chapter 4 DEALING WITH HOMONYMS

29

EXPLANATION 29

Definitions 29

Use 29

Methods 30

Example 30

GUIDED PRACTICE 31

SET 1 LEARNING HOMONYMS 31

SET 2 CHECKING CONTEXT 33

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 34

Core Homonyms for More Study 35

Chapter 5 DEALING WITH FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

37

EXPLANATION 37

Definitions 37

Use 39

Methods 40

GUIDED PRACTICE 40

SET 1 FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE 1 41

SET 2 FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE 2 41

SET 3 FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE 3 42

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 43

Chapter 6
LEARNING
TECHNICAL VOCABULARY _____ 44

EXPLANATION 44

Definitions 44

Use 44

Methods 45

GUIDED PRACTICE 48

SET 1 WORDS ABOUT FILMS (Film Arts) 48

SET 2 WORDS ABOUT LANGUAGE (Linguistics) 50

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 53

Chapter 7
FINDING THE MEANINGS
OF WORDS
WITH THE SSCD SYSTEM _____ 56

EXPLANATION 56

Definitions 56

Use 56

Methods 57

Example 59

GUIDED PRACTICE 60

SET 1 GUARDING THE PLAYBOOK (Sports) 60

SET 2 JOINT OWNERSHIP (Business) 60

SET 3 A PRINCIPLE OF LEARNING (Psychology) 61

SET 4 LOOKING AHEAD (Child Development) 61

SET 5 RUNNING FOR OFFICE (Politics) 62

SET 6 CHOOSING A LIFE'S WORK (Vocational Guidance) 62

SET 7 GOOD TEACHING (Education) 63

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 64

_____ **part two** **the comprehension skills** _____

Chapter 8
USING PARAGRAPH PATTERNS
IN FINDING MAIN IDEAS
AND SUPPORTING IDEAS _____ 67

The Comprehension Skills 67

EXPLANATION 67

Definitions 67

Use 70

Methods 71

GUIDED PRACTICE 75

SET 1 THE LAWS IN OUR LIVES (Law) 75

SET 2 ALCOHOL INFLUENCES MANY PARTS OF YOUR BODY (Physiology) 75

SET 3 WARNING: A TERRIBLE PROBLEM (Health) 76

SET 4 JUST WHAT IS A COMPUTER? (Computer Science) 77

SET 5 THE JACK STORIES (Folklore) 78

SET 6 PROTECTION (Insurance) 78

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 79*Chapter 9***USING METHODS
OF PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT
IN FINDING MAIN IDEAS
AND SUPPORTING IDEAS**

82**EXPLANATION 82****Definitions 82****Use 83****Methods 83****GUIDED PRACTICE 89**

SET 1 FINDING THE RIGHT SHOES (Recreation) 89

SET 2 VINES (Botany) 90

SET 3 GOVERNMENT'S JOB (Political Science) 90

SET 4 OUR COUNTRY (Geography) 91

SET 5 WHERE DO OUR ATTITUDES COME FROM? (Sociology) 92

SET 6 LIGHTNING (Physical Science) 93

SET 7 KNOWING WHAT IS RIGHT (Ethics) 93

SET 8 A HIDDEN LINE (Architecture) 95

SET 9 SERENDIPITY (History of Technology) 96

SET 10 MICHELANGELO AND LEONARDO (History of Art) 97

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 98*Chapter 10***FINDING IDEAS
IN LONGER SELECTIONS**

101**EXPLANATION 101****Definitions 101****Use 102****Methods 102****Example 103****GUIDED PRACTICE 107**

SET 1 PAYING FOR COLLEGE (Consumer Economics) 107

Answers to the Guided Practice Set 112

Chapter 11 READING CRITICALLY

113

EXPLANATION	113
Definitions	113
Use	113
Methods	114
GUIDED PRACTICE	121
SET 1	SEPARATING FACT FROM OPINION 1 121
SET 2	SEPARATING FACT FROM OPINION 2 122
SET 3	SEPARATING FACT FROM OPINION 3 122
SET 1	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 1 123
SET 2	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 2 124
SET 3	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 3 125
SET 4	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 4 126
SET 5	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 5 127
SET 6	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 6 128
SET 7	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 7 129
SET 8	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 8 130
SET 9	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 9 131
SET 10	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 10 132
SET 11	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 11 133
SET 12	DEALING WITH MISTAKES IN USING THE METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT 12 134
Answers to the Guided Practice Sets	135

part three the reading-study skills

Chapter 12 PREVIEWING

141

The Reading Study Skills	141
EXPLANATION	141
Definitions	141
Use	142
Methods	142

GUIDED PRACTICE	145
Answers to the Guided Practice Set	145

Chapter 13 ANALYZING AND OUTLINING/DIAGRAMING _____ 146

EXPLANATION	146
Definitions	146
Use	147
Methods	147
Example	151
GUIDED PRACTICE	152
Answers to the Guided Practice Sets	157

Chapter 14 SUMMARIZING AND NOTE TAKING _____ 159

EXPLANATION	159
Definitions	159
Use	160
Methods	160
Example	162
GUIDED PRACTICE	162
SET 1 PAYING FOR COLLEGE (Consumer Economics)	162
SET 2 MASTERING NEW MATERIAL (Psychology)	163
SET 3 ASSERTIVENESS TRAINING (Mental Health)	164
Answers to the Guided Practice Sets	166

_____ *part four* *reading speed and flexibility* _____

Chapter 15 SKIMMING AND SCANNING _____ 168

Reading Speeds and Flexibility	168
EXPLANATION	168
Definitions	168
Use	169

Methods 169

Example 169

GUIDED PRACTICE 171

SET 1 OUR GREAT BILL OF RIGHTS (Political Science) 171

SET 2 WHAT DOCTORS DO I NEED? (Medicine) 174

SET 3 YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE (Philosophy) 175

SET 4 MILESTONES (History) 176

SET 5 HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS (Psychology) 177

Answers to the Guided Sets 178

Chapter 16 CHOOSING READING SPEEDS

180

EXPLANATION 180

Definitions 180

Use 182

General Methods 182

Methods for Reading at a Slow Speed 185

Methods for Reading at a Normal Speed 185

Methods for Reading at a Fast Speed 186

Guide: Questions for Choosing and Using the Reading Speeds 187

Example 189

GUIDED PRACTICE 192

SET 1 LOUDNESS (Physical Science) 193

SET 2 CHILD MISTREATMENT (Social Work) 195

SET 3 DOING YOUR RÉSUMÉ (Business) 199

SET 4 THE SKIES FORETELL THE WEATHER (Climatology) 202

SET 5 DESCRIBING CROUPS WITH NUMBERS (Statistics) 204

Answers to the Guided Practice Sets 207

part five using reading as a tool

Chapter 17 USING READING IN UNDERSTANDING IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE

208

Using Reading as a Tool 208

EXPLANATION 208

Definitions 208

Use 209

Methods 210

GUIDED PRACTICE	213
SET 1 NOVEL	213
SET 2 SHORT STORY	214
SET 3 PLAY	215
Answers to the Guided Practice Sets	216

Chapter 18 **USING THE SQ3R SYSTEM** **IN READING TEXTBOOKS** _____ 217

EXPLANATION	217
Definitions	217
Use	217
Methods	218
GUIDED PRACTICE	224
SET 1 INTELLIGENCE: ARE WE BORN WITH IT OR DO WE LEARN IT?	
(Anthropology)	225
Answers to the Guided Practice Set	234
ADDITIONAL PRACTICE	235
Answers to the Additional Practice	235

Chapter 19 **USING READING** **IN GETTING INFORMATION** **FROM OTHER NONFICTION** _____ 236

EXPLANATION	236
Definitions	236
Use	236
Methods	237
GUIDED PRACTICE	238
SET 1 NEWS STORY	238
SET 2 ESSAY: NO PASS, NO PLAY (Physical Education)	239
SET 3 TECHNICAL WRITING: DEALING WITH ANAPHYLACTIC SHOCK	
(First Aid)	242
Answers to the Guided Practice Sets	243

READING

1

Ideas about Reading

What Is Reading?

Reading is understanding messages in written or printed materials. To get this understanding, we find out about the writers' ideas by doing two things at the same time. We remember what we already know about the message, and we use the reading skills that will help us find out what we want to know.

Why Is Reading So Important?

Reading is so important because we need it, and we use it, to carry out some important purposes. Five main purposes for reading are

- To learn
- To find out
- To get directions for doing something
- To have fun
- To appreciate the art of writing

Using reading for these purposes is one of the most important things we do. It is one of our keys to the world. Why? Because we live in an information age.

What is an information age? It is an age when getting and giving information is a big part of almost everything—for example, going to school, working at most jobs, and managing most parts of our lives. This information comes through face-to-face meetings, printed materials, telephones, TVs, and computers.

As adults in an information age, we need to be able to deal with information in many ways. That is, we have to put out information, and we have to take it in and use it. Further, we have to do this with a great deal of material; we have to do it fast; and we have to do it without mistakes or with very few mistakes.

Therefore, we have to read very well. We have to be among the best readers to get a good education, to get the best jobs, to stay in touch with others, to keep up in sports, to manage our money, to stay healthy, to be good citizens, and to do the many other things we must do to get along, and to get ahead, in today's world.

What Are the Best Readers Like?

The best readers are those who have reached a very high level in working with printed materials.

- They can *understand* the ideas in written materials; they can *remember* those ideas; and they can *use* those ideas to help them do what they want to do.
- They can do these things at a speed that is right for their goal in reading the material and right for how hard or easy the material is to read.

At the same time, the best readers understand, remember, and use ideas and choose reading speeds with as little work and with as few mistakes as possible.

What Is Our Target?

Our target is to become the best readers. You can read now, but, like the rest of us, you can be a better reader. We all can become better readers.

How can we become better readers? We must develop better skills for

Understanding vocabulary

Comprehending what we read

Using reading-study skills

Learning to choose, and use, the right reading speeds

Using reading to do things

Further, we must learn the right ways to approach reading.

Ways to Approach Reading

Your approach to reading should be active and thoughtful—the same as your approach to other things. You shouldn't just drift into a reading situation. At the outset, you should stand back and size up the situation. You should decide exactly

what you want to do and how you can do it. Stated another way, you need to know exactly what your purpose is and how you will reach it.

How do you take this active, thoughtful approach? Do the following things:

Decide on your purposes.

Be flexible.

Gain a wide knowledge-base.

Understand reading skills.

Get practice.

Pay no attention to false statements about reading.

These things can mean the difference between whether you control the reading situation or whether it controls you, so let's look at them in more detail.

Decide on Your Purposes

Before you read something, you must decide exactly what you want to find out. Answer this question: "Exactly why am I reading this selection?" Do you need only a general notion about the writers' main ideas? Do you want to learn all their supporting ideas so that you can use them on a test? Do you want to find out what they think about a problem such as how to get a good buy on a car?

Deciding on purposes is very important for two reasons. First, it helps you pick the reading skills you should use. Second, it helps you know when you have gotten what you should from your reading. As you can see, deciding on your purposes saves you time and work, and it may mean the difference between success or failure in using reading.

Be Flexible

Being flexible means picking the right reading skills and the right reading speeds to suit your purposes. The idea is that you should change your skills and speeds as you need to for doing different things. For example, you shouldn't read at the same speed all the time any more than you should always walk at the same speed. It all depends on what your purposes are. In the same way, you don't use the same reading skills all the time any more than you use the same skills in playing basketball and baseball. In reading, be prepared to be flexible.

Gain a Wide Knowledge-Base

A *knowledge-base* is what you know about something. It is information that guides your actions. A wide knowledge-base is very important to good reading. It helps you in figuring out what something says and what it means. You might be good in finding main ideas, in using context clues to word meanings, and at every other

reading skill, but if you don't have a good knowledge-base, you'll have trouble getting the message. The old saying works here, too: "Them as has, gits." The wider your knowledge-base is, the easier it is for you to learn and to add to it.

How do you get a good knowledge-base? It comes as you live and learn, as you do more things, as you get to know more people, as you take more courses in school, and as you read more widely. The key is this: Move out; do things; think about your experiences and reading; figure out how they relate to other things. Don't give up easily. If you keep active, you will build a wider knowledge-base. In turn, as your knowledge-base gets wider, your reading and studies will become much easier.

Understand the Reading Skills

Of course, a good reader is able to use reading skills without thinking about what he or she is doing, just as a person walks without thinking about every step. But this book pays as much attention to your understanding of what you are doing as it does to your practicing. That is, it explains the skills: It tells what the skills are, why they are valuable, and how to do them. It goes on to give you an example of the skill being used.

You might ask, "Why should I be able to explain a reading skill? Isn't it enough to be good at doing it?" No, that isn't enough. When you study psychology, you'll find out why you don't do as well when you learn things by rote—when you learn without understanding. Being able to tell what you are doing or what you should do helps you to do things more smoothly, to remember them better, and to use them better in new situations. Just remember how much time athletes spend in skill-practice looking at game films and analyzing and going over plays.

Get Practice

You need practice, too. Practice means taking what you learn about the skills and using it in new situations. It's not enough just to know about something. You have to practice doing it. You may know all about how to shoot baskets in basketball, but you can't expect to be able to hit the basket most of the time unless you spend many hours practicing. So it is with reading. To be good at the reading skills, you need to learn about them and then do a lot of practicing.

There are practice materials in this book, and you should also get further practice on your own. Why have this further, independent practice? *First*, you need more practice than there is room to give in this book. *Second*, you will like the practice more if you pick out practice materials for yourself. The practice materials in the book are selected from materials adults read. You need to be able to read such material, but there are also things that you like and things that you need to read. Only you can pick out your personal materials. *Third*, you need to learn

how to use the reading skills with materials at various readability levels. In the book, the readability levels of the explanatory and practice materials are highly controlled. Why? So that you can concentrate on learning the ideas and skills. Once you have learned these ideas and skills, your next step is to apply them to materials at other readability levels. To sum it all up, you should spend a lot of time practicing both the materials in the book and the materials you choose for yourself.

Ignore False Statements about Reading

Some statements about reading are untrue. The following are some common wrong ideas about reading.

If something is published, it's important. Not so. A lot of nonsense is published. Also, some things may be important to the writer and to some readers, but they may not be important for your purposes. Decide for yourself what's important for you.

If something is published, it's true. Not so. Some writers deliberately write untrue or misleading material; some make honest mistakes. Others write material that is true when it is published but that is disproved by later discoveries. Think for yourself and question what you read.

You should say the words in your mind as you read. Not so. Skip the "saying" stage and save yourself time. This is important to reading faster, because when you must say the words, you can't read any faster than you can talk. Learn to look and know as you do when you look at a picture.

People simply can't learn to read at speeds like 500 wpm. Sure they can. If they learn the skills and practice hard, they may reach faster speeds. Set your goals for where you want to go and work to get there.

When people read fast, their understanding level is lower. Not so. A person who uses the right skills for speed reading keeps up understanding while building up speed. Learn speed-reading skills.

People can't learn to read fast without using machines. Not so. Machines help because they make you go fast. They also show you how well you can do when you're reading fast. But you can get the same results without machines. Don't stop trying just because you can't get to a machine.

Knowing word meanings and word-analysis skills is not important for good understanding. It all depends on the kind of material you want to read. If you want to stick to materials on your present reading level, then vocabulary doesn't matter much. If you want to be able to read more difficult materials, however, then knowing vocabulary skills is important.

You should be able to read a selection one time and be through with it. Maybe so, maybe not. It depends on your purpose and on the material. One reading may be enough if you need only a general idea and if the material is simple and easy. More than one reading may be needed if the material is difficult and if you want to remember what you read. Read a selection as often as you need to.

When you are a good reader, you have no more trouble understanding and using written material. Not so. There is much more to understanding and using written material than just being able to read it. For example, you need a good knowledge-base, and to understand some materials, you need more knowledge than you do for other materials.

If you can't get the writers' message, it's always your fault. Not so. Some writers lose control of their material and don't know exactly what they want to say. Some know what they want to say but cannot say it clearly. Writing clearly is very hard to do.

The Plans for This Book

You can read with better understanding if you can see the plan the writers follow in doing an article or a book. In the rest of this book, we build on the *ideas about reading* and the *ways to approach reading* that we have just looked at. We use three plans to do this building. One plan is for the whole set of eighteen reading skills. Another plan is for each chapter. Still another plan is for the reading materials we work with.

Look at the table of contents. There you will see the three plans put together. The details follow.

The Plan for the Whole Set of Reading Skills

We look at eighteen reading skills. They are grouped in five parts.

Part 1: The Vocabulary Skills

Part 2: The Comprehension Skills

Part 3: The Reading-Study Skills

Part 4: Reading Speed and Flexibility

Part 5: Using Reading as a Tool

The Plan for Each Chapter

Each chapter is about one reading skill. First, there is an explanation. Second, there is guided practice.

The *explanation* tells you about the skill and has these parts:

Definitions—telling what the skill is

Use—telling why the skill is valuable

Methods—telling how to do the skill, that is, what steps to use

Example—showing the skill being used with written materials