What is the difference between skimming and scanning reading skills?

Reading is often treated as a leisure activity but very few people know that it is actually a technique. Skimming and scanning are the two often confused techniques for reading or to be specific reading strategies.

Skimming

Skimming often refers to the way in which one reads at a faster rate to gain the general idea about the text without paying heed to the intentional and detailed meaning of the text.

For Example - When one reads the text only in order to understand the thesis statement, in one or two lines.

Skimming is achieved by reading that text only which is considered to be relevant.

Skimming requires a lower understanding of word recognition than compared to scanning.

Procedure - Read the introductory paragraph and the conclusion paragraph very carefully. You should search for headings and subheadings to get a good grasp of the idea.

Scanning

Scanning refers to the technique when one looks into the document or the text provided for searching some specific text such as some keywords.

Example - Now it may be applied to the real-life example of a dictionary, wherein one looks for a specific word meaning or a directory wherein one searches for the phone number of someone.

Scanning requires one to have a look at the whole document quickly at least once.

Scanning requires a higher understanding of word recognition compared to skimming.

Procedure - You should search for headings and subheadings to get a good grasp of the idea, as to where your required detail will be found.

Skimming and scanning, therefore, are two very different strategies for speed reading. They are

used for different purposes, and they require different reading skills, but they are very significant to go about reading comprehension.

When to use Scanning and when to use Skimming

The differences between skimming and scanning are crystal clear. Skimming helps you tell what the general information is, while scanning helps you position a particular piece of information. In fact, you have to understand your purposes of reading in order to apply a proper technique. You have to be the most flexible reader you can become. The variability of the situations requires you to be adaptable.

Keep reading if you don't know when to use these two different techniques.

1. When to use skimming

Skimming has always been one of the most selected ways when it comes to FAST READING. Before putting any effort into studying a document, practicing skimming can be a good hand in previewing. You can use skimming before entering a new chapter of your textbook or a long article. To be simply said, most people refer to the use of skimming when they need to save time. Time-saving has always been one of the top priorities of today's society. Reading every word can prevent us from increasing our reading speed. There're many situations that spending long hours of laborious reading can't do anything well.

Suppose you have to read an academic text and write an essay about its topic, skimming can't do all the job as there is too much information. This skill would help when you're trying to find out if something is a waste of time or similar to something else you've already known. Using skimming is an ideal strategy when there are only a few days left and you're about to take an examination. In short, you save your time by skimming.

2. When to use scanning

As convenient as it seems, skimming can't guarantee you all the important points. Usually, you need scanning when you find a friend's phone number in a telephone book or last night football's scores in the newspaper. Or when you're in a new restaurant knowing they have your favourite dish but not sure the price is reasonable, you also need to scan along the menu to see it with the price. Scanning significantly proves its value when researching and studying. These two kinds of activity can't be successful if they depend on only your general knowledge.

You may also need scanning to locate the correct answer for the given questions. You are likely to scan when you have no intention of getting a general idea. Obviously, if you have no doubt of your purposes for reading and other unrelated information is far from support, now take scanning into your consideration. Scanning is perfect when it comes to looking for something more particular rather than an overview idea in your mind.

Short definitions for skimming and scanning

Sometimes, of course, giving definitions will truly do us a favor. Take a good look at two short paragraphs below to better understand skimming and scanning.

Skimming is a process of reading to get an overall view or get an impression of the content. This is when you pick out the main ideas or messages.

Scanning, on the other hand, requires you to look for a particular word or phrase. You can totally ignore unnecessary ones. If you're reading, you must be having or about to have questions to be answered, just wisely choose what to read and quickly get what may benefit.

How to use both skills in your reading

1. Effective reading with skimming

When learning to skim, get yourself ready to move your eyes quickly through the pages. Skimming is not about placing your eyes wherever your attention is drawn to. The effective work of skimming does not require you to do that.

You know that you don't read every word but carefully pay attention to what forms the structure of that reading material. So what exactly are we talking about? Headings, bulleted lists, numbered lists, bold text, italic text… These are just some of them, though. Now here are some steps you should take if you do skimming:

Look at the table of contents if there is. It's a fast way to figure out what's going on.

The main headings are of the most essential, so don't forget to read them. Remember that tables and charts have headings, too (e.g., U.S population by age and gender, Healthcare cost from 2010 to 2017, and Risks of environmental impacts). Some may miss the headings of tables and charts as a habit, so keep in mind they are there for some good reasons.

After reading the first sentences, scroll your eyes down to the last ones of each paragraph. These sentences can be the topic sentences that hold the main idea. This should not take you too much time as there're only a few important words to follow. However, don't hesitate to stop if you think something needs to be read entirely. Make sure you leave the paragraph and move to the next after carefully skimming.

Attentively read the keywords. They can be nouns, dates, events, names, numbers,… These very single words or phrases that give details are worth considering. Questions about these kinds of information usually show up in the IELTS test.

Along with your skimming process, underline or highlight important words and phrases. It's good to use a marker or pencil (if you think you might want to erase the lines after that). This is also a preparation for scanning.

Remember it's you who decide what rate of speed you want to skim. Of course, it's not necessarily equal in every part. The situations may vary, it could be a slow-down when you skim through an unfamiliar word, for example. Sometimes, there are sentences that need more than one glance.

As far as what we have agreed in the previous section, you only scan when you know what to scan. There are some facts you want to find out. So what are the facts that you need? If you have questions and are looking for a specific answer, there are probably some keywords in the question.

2. Effective reading with scanning

You can now leave out all the rest of the text as you're in search of some specific question-related information. In case there're not any given keywords, establish them. Choose a few words or phrases to search for. It's your choice to look for one or more keywords at a time. Let's see if you can practice these suggestions below:

Use a finger of your hand to scan, which is a helpful way to stay focused. The calmness of mind together with the strong physical image of your finger-pointing along the lines will provide you with confidence. You're also sure of what you've scanned and what's left to be scanned.

Repeat silently in your mind the keywords while scanning. You may think you're sure of what you need, but keeping on telling yourself the wanted word or phrase can never be anything of disadvantages. Whether it's a phone number, a person's name, a location, a country… keep saying quietly that's the destination.

When you come across a keyword while scanning, stop, and carefully read the surrounding text.

If there's anything serving your purposes, note them down to review later and see if this information needs noticing. The chances we find needed sentences and then lose them can happen without a warning. If we do not prepare for surprises, we'll be surprisingly slower than planning.