Many students are convinced that the only way to deal with difficult material is to read it one word at a time, painstakingly. They expect to plod their way through it, and believe that somehow the information will gradually sink into their heads. That’s a fine idea, but by studying this way, high school or college could stretch over too many years, and few students have that kind of time. Moreover, the material becomes more and more challenging, hence more difficult to read and digest.

Instead, students need to develop a more effective way of reading. They must learn to read faster while maintaining comprehension and readily identifying important terms and ideas to be memorized. Reading must not take so much time that there’s no time left to synthesize, summarize, and review. We teach a study method that has been markedly successful over the years. It is a variation of a classic system called, SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, and review) or PQRST (preview, question, read, summarize, tell).

The study reading method we use involves *previewing* and *skimming* before reading, then reading thoughtfully in “chunks” (2-5 page sections), and finally putting it all together reflectively. Students should comprehend the first 50% in the first few minutes, so before they get tired of reading they are free to choose how much more they need to read carefully and when to read it. That way students can schedule their reading more productively.

**The Importance of Previewing**

Previewing has been called “the most important comprehension skill.” To preview, students should spend the first few minutes looking over the material to determine what the assignment is about and what the main ideas are probably going to be. Students should then spend roughly five minutes reading the titles and subtitles as well as looking at the pictures, slides, charts, and graphs. They should read the captions under them and anything in heavy type. The goal of previewing is to try to figure out what or who is going to be important in the assignment. If it is a narrative, students should determine where and when the story takes place. Next, the student should read the summary and any questions, if available. In previewing, students should note new vocabulary and definitions as well. Previewing is an invaluable skill that facilitates concentration, comprehension, and memorization. The more difficult the material, the more important the preview and skimming steps become, as they will actually reduce the amount of overall time needed to obtain excellent comprehension.
Skimming

An indispensable reading skill for students is skimming. The skimming method we suggest involves previewing, then reading the first paragraph, the first sentence in each succeeding paragraph, and the last paragraph. No one can afford to read slowly through all the material. A student who can skim is able to cover an astonishing amount of text in relatively little time with improved understanding. There are many different styles of skimming, but they generally fall into three main categories: sampling methods, dynamic methods, and various combinations of the two. For this chapter, we will only be concerned with a specific sampling method.

The First, First, Last Sampling Method of skimming has been successful with students for a number of years, especially when combined with the Structured Comprehension Matrix. With practice, this skimming method can be learned relatively easily. This type of skimming can also be carried out very quickly (Thirty seconds a page is a good goal.), and it gives the reader an initial 40-50% understanding of the text. That 50% makes the class lectures and discussions far more interesting and informative.

With practice, students should be able to preview thirty pages of text in five to fifteen minutes and skim these pages in another fifteen minutes. Using this method of study reading, students should have a reasonable idea of what the passage covers and of what is likely to be important. (See Fig. 3.)

Fig. 3. A Process for Study Reading for Maximum Comprehension in Limited Time.
After previewing a thirty-page reading, students then skim it by reading the first paragraph, the first sentence of every paragraph that follows, and then the last paragraph. Next, students reread the summary reflectively. The last step is to try to answer the questions “What is the main idea? What are the major ideas and important definitions? When? Where? Why?” and try to determine the main idea, minor ideas, and possible test questions.

While it would be nice to be able to read every word to prepare for class, for most students, there are “not enough hours in the day.” However, students who have previewed and skimmed the assigned reading are much better prepared to both listen and understand than they would have been had they not previewed, skimmed, and thought about the material. Prepared listening requires some prior knowledge and comprehension of the information, and the task of skimming and previewing the reading is powerful preparation for listening in class. The prepared listener has a marked advantage over the unprepared listeners.

The key to successful previewing and skimming lies in these admonitions: “Keep moving; move right through it; don’t get bogged down.” Many students tend to become absorbed in their reading, and they tend to confuse reading with learning. They think, “Oh, I’ve got to read this so carefully because I want to learn this information and pass the test.” Reading is gathering information, not memorizing information. In contrast, memorization involves first reading and then trying to write or say the information from memory. Understanding comes with reading and listening, but it’s saying the information aloud, then, summarizing it, etc. that helps students learn the information. We will be talking more about this distinction between understanding and knowing in later chapters.

Becoming a better reader is important to success in school. One of the first things that we do when students come to us – after we have asked them to work on their listening skills – is to work on their reading. Effective reading is essential to success in school and beyond. The more that students read, the better they are likely to read, so we suggest that students read widely.