

Reading Like a Professional

The daily life of scholars, scientists and engineers in the US involves a great deal of challenging reading. We cannot take the time to read every word. We must *scan*, which means quickly find the most important contents—the “news.” Luckily, effective writers have developed a number of conventions that allow us to find our way through documents easily and retrieve the information we seek.

A clear understanding of the general organization and “logic” of professional documents is an essential tool for efficient reading. We expect a document to explain the research project’s purpose, relevance, and outcome in the first sections that we read. We also understand that many professional documents are deliberately repetitive. Some of the most important information is stated in several different places within one paper. For example, many documents provide key information (e.g., results of a research project) in three places: between the title and the body of the paper, as an *abstract* or *executive summary*; in a more detailed subtitled section of the body that focuses on that information; and at the end of a paper, in a summary paragraph.

In fact, we should closely study a document’s appearance, including titles and subtitles. These signals attract our attention because they are generally highlighted by bold font and extra space in the document. Rather than reading from the start of a paper to the end, we can use the key terms provided in these organizational devices to lead us to the section or subsection of most interest. For example, the following subheadings clearly indicate the information we will find in these sections of a paper: “Research objectives” “Theoretical study” and “Preliminary results.”

Skilled readers also benefit from the conventions of English paragraph structure. All formal documents are composed of paragraphs. A change in paragraphs is signaled by indenting the first line, or by including an extra line between them. This use of space allows us to identify and move between paragraphs easily. Why is it important to be able to navigate between paragraphs? The first sentence or two provides its key message. The rest of the sentences in a paragraph provide details that support the general message. In the sections of a paper that hold less interest, we often read only the first two sentences of a paragraph—that is, we *skim*—before we move on to the next paragraph. To ensure that we notice important details embedded in a paragraph, writers can provide a list, table or figure, which is formatted to draw our attention.

In addition to these organizational, formatting and paragraphing conventions, we can identify signals at the sentence level to help us *skim* effectively. Standard phrases frequently appear at the start of topic and other sentences to indicate the kind of information that follows. For example, the phrase “In addition” at the start of this paragraph signals that more tools for professional reading will be presented. A writer can signal constraints, problems or disagreements with “however” or “on the other hand.” At the start of the next paragraph, the phrase “in sum” signals that this short reading has come to an end.

In sum, professional writers and readers in the US work within a set of rules that allow the reader to retrieve information from a document efficiently. One good test of reader-friendly writing is to see if you can construct a summary of the key content of a document using only the first two sentences of each paragraph. Does this document pass the test?

Task: Define *scan* and *skim*.

Effective Impromptu Speaking

Speaking with little advance preparation--impromptu speaking--can be intimidating. Effective spontaneous speaking is, however, essential for success in academic and professional life.

A. Common contexts requiring good impromptu skills

- Interactive classes, such as those based on case studies
- Study groups
- Team projects
- Professional meetings and networking
- Job Interviews
- Q & A sessions of presentations
- Poster sessions

B. Strategies to help in these situations

- Anticipate the likelihood of your contributions being solicited and the topics being covered in a given context. In most cases, you will be asked to speak on a familiar subject.
- Speak briefly and directly to the point. Do not ramble or repeat yourself. Unless the context requires it, do not feel that you must provide a lengthy treatment of a topic. A refined three-step approach works well:
 - Make a short statement to enter the topic
 - Concisely make your point
 - Exit gracefully
- If concrete detail and examples are required, try to relate your contributions to the topics and experiences you know best.
- Use gambits to “buy time,” organize your thoughts and create movement.
- Remember the power of nonverbal communication. Speak at a reasonable rate and volume. Use your eye contact, posture and gestures to convey confidence and sincerity.

C. Sample gambits for graceful impromptu communication

Hesitation (don't overuse)

Well
Let's see
Let me think
How can I describe/put/explain

Introducing the topic/Framing

I have two points to make.
I have conflicting reactions.
X has raised a good question.
I'd like to add something.

Effective Impromptu Speaking

Movement

Let me first
The second/third/last X
Why is this a good approach?

Reference

As X said earlier
We decided last week
Student/author gave a good
example of

Concluding

To summarize,
So, these are the reasons
I'd like to hear what others think about X.
Do you understand what I mean?

D.Task: Practicing contributing to the conversation. In pairs, take turns doing impromptus on the topics below. Use gambits from the list above to frame your comments.

1. If you could magnify one of your senses permanently, which would you choose? Why?
2. Describe the role of sports in the life of the average citizen in your country.
3. In your opinion, what is the safest practical form of electrical power production?
4. What should the US be doing to prevent global warming?
5. Can online education work?
6. What would you tell a friend from high school who was considering applying to grad school at MIT?
7. Why is nonverbal communication important?

Critical Listening: Common Structure Cues

Skilled speakers use patterns (gambits) that help audience members understand the content and progression of their presentations. Used appropriately, these signals help make spoken communication effective (whether impromptu, or in a meeting or formal presentation) because they move the listeners smoothly along and give the information coherence.

A critical listener is careful to recognize these signals and is then prepared for the organizational pattern that the speaker has indicated. For example, the comment "I am going to argue that free trade is important for a number of reasons" alerts the audience to listen for a series of distinct arguments. On the other hand, the comment "I'd like to look at US health care policy with respect to the rest of the developed world." indicates a comparative approach.

Task 1: Review the following gambits carefully. Circle the ones with which you are familiar.

Task 2: Before the next class, pay close attention in your lectures, seminars, and conversations to hear these expressions. Make a list of all that you notice. Be prepared to report back to your classmates on the kinds of organizational cues you heard.

Introduction Cues

By way of introduction . . .	First, I'd like to
Yesterday, we were looking at/discussing/talking about . . .	Let me start by
To pick up where we left off . . .	My main goal today is
To summarize briefly before we begin . . .	
The topic of today's lecture is . . .	

Organization Cues

• *Generalization/Specific*

Generally speaking . . .	In general . . .
On the whole . . .	Overall . . .
By and large . . .	For the most part . . .

• *Chronological Order*

To begin with . . .	In the beginning . . .	First, 2nd . . .
Then . . .	Next . . .	Following this
Afterwards . . .	Subsequently . . .	Before
Ultimately . . .	Finally . . .	

• *Comparison/Contrast*

Similarly . . .	In like fashion . . .
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In contrast . . .
Likewise . . .

In contrast to this
On the one hand/on the other hand

• *Cause/Effect*

As a result . . .
Thus . . .
If this occurs, then . . .
Because of this . . .

The upshot of this is . . .
Therefore . . .
The outcome of this . . .
Consequently . . .

Main Idea Cues

Let me stress that . . .
Let me repeat. . .
This is a major factor. . .
Why was this so important?
I'd like to emphasize . . .

The principal point is . . .
The main idea is . . .
The remarkable thing is . . .
It is of significance that . . . Most
important to remember is . . .

Example or Detail Cues

For one thing. . . for another . . .
Moreover. . .
For instance . . .
A few of these are . . .
Furthermore . . .

For example. . .
In the case of . . .
Also . . .
On such case . . .
In addition. . .

Digression Cues

Incidentally . . .
That reminds me . . .
By the way . . .

But before we get to that . . .
That makes me think of . . .
Of course . . .

Amendment Clues

I just remembered . . .
I almost forgot . . .

I forgot to mention . . .
I just realized . . .

Conclusion Cues

In conclusion . . .
To summarize . . .
In summary . . .
My goal today was . . .

Let me leave you with the following
To conclude . . .
The final thought I'd like to leave you with . . .
I'd like you to leave today with a clear idea . . .

Critical Listening: Coping with Speaker Faults

No speaker is perfect. Even the most professional lecturer can have good and bad days. In order to get the most out of a lecture or presentation, you must be a “critical listener.”

Critical listeners separate essential information from the nonessential information as they listen. To do this, you must be actively involved in listening. As you listen, carry on a dialogue in your head, mentally challenge the position of the speaker, and wonder about the speaker's choice of examples. A practiced critical listener will concentrate especially hard when aware that a speaker has one or more of the following faults:

- 1) A **digression**--occurs when a speaker makes a side comment unrelated, or minimally related, to the main topic.
- 2) An **amendment**--occurs when a speaker suddenly realizes that s/he has given inaccurate information and tries to correct the problem. In this awkward situation, wordiness and confusion may make the speaker hard to follow.
- 3) **Dependency on entertainment**, such as anecdotes, jokes, and lengthy introductions--can be distracting and misleading.
- 4) **Weak or faulty example**--may lead to confusion, or even support a different point than the speaker intends.
- 5) **Imbalance**--occurs when a speaker runs out of time. In this case, several important points can be made in a rush at the end of the talk, without the usual signals of importance.

Task: In the next two days, pay close attention in your lectures to see if any of these five common faults occur. Be prepared to report back to your classmates. List any speaker faults that challenged your listening skills, and note, as well, how the speaker “got back on track.”

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