Part 1: Key Reading Skills

SKIMMING FOR GIST OR PREVIEW

UNIT 1

What?

Skimming is when you run your eyes very quickly over a text to get a general idea of what it is about. You often do this to preview a text before you read it more fully. For example, you might skim the pages of a textbook to decide if it is on the topic you want. But you also might sometimes skim instead of reading a text in a detailed way—when the gist or general idea is enough for your purpose. Most people, for example, skim when they are reading a newspaper or magazine. They don't have the time or interest to read every article in detail.

How?

When you skim, you do the following:
- Look especially at headings, highlighted words, and picture captions.
- Usually read the first paragraph of a text fully and perhaps also the first sentences of each paragraph.
- Take notice of some words, especially if you see them again and again.
- Do not read every single word or every detail.
- Do not worry about parts that you do not understand.
- Keep your eyes moving right through the text; don't get stuck in one section only.

Why?

You skim to get a general idea about the following:
- The content of a text (e.g., Is it on a topic or theme you are interested in? Will it give you the information you need?)
- The purpose of a text (e.g., Is it written to entertain? To inform? To persuade? To explain?)
- The kind of writing (e.g., Is it comic or serious? Does it have lots of dialogue? Lots of description?)
- The level of difficulty of a text (e.g., Is it dense and academic?)

Skimming before you read sets up expectations of what you will meet in the text, and this helps you to read and understand better.

There are many skimming activities in Part 2, mostly in the “Preparing to Read” sections. Try to stick to any time limits given, to force yourself to skim quickly.
These skimming activities will show you how much you can understand about a text by skimming only.

The newspaper articles below are from the “News in Brief” section of a newspaper. Match the articles to their headlines (underneath) as quickly as you can. **Skim only. Do not read the whole article.**

- **a** A mother who cradled her baby as she was hurled five meters headfirst off a bridge into a waterfall yesterday said she was amazed they escaped alive. The bizarre incident occurred as gale-force winds swept across the northern suburbs for three hours. The mother escaped with only a broken arm and, miraculously, the baby survived the experience without a scratch.

- **b** An unconscious man found wedged between rocks in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney was yesterday winched to safety by rescue crews. The man had been lost for three days in the wilderness before falling down a steep ravine and becoming pinned between three large boulders. He has head, leg, and spinal injuries and is in critical condition in North Shore Hospital.

- **c** Shark sightings forced the closure of three popular South Coast beaches on the weekend. After a number of swimmers reported their fears to the beach patrol, an aerial patrol was called to the area and the presence of five sharks was confirmed. Closures have become a familiar event for swimmers in the area during the summer, although at this stage the reason for the sharks’ behavior is not clear.

- **d** Police have warned businesses in the city’s west side to be on the lookout for counterfeit $50 and $100 bills. More than ten fake bills have been handed in over the past month. Police say it is quite simple to detect bills that are not real as the graphics are blurred and the writing is larger than on authentic bills. Bars and clubs appear to be the main target, but at least two bills were used in shopping centers.

- **e** A 35-year-old man survived a speedboat accident on the weekend while racing on the Nepean River. The injured man, from the Central Coast, suffered chest and back injuries but was in a stable condition last night in Nepean Hospital. The boat in which he was racing sank and was thought to be beyond repair.

- **f** Police have charged a 24-year-old man from Adelaide with possession of explosive goods after a tip-off from the manager of a local sports club. The manager saw a man acting suspiciously in the club parking lot early yesterday morning, so he recorded the car’s number plate and called the police. Police investigating the case said that the explosives were not particularly powerful but commended the manager’s quick actions.
Give yourself 60 seconds only to skim the text below. After reading, answer the questions without looking back at the text. You will probably be surprised at how much you know. After you finish, check the answers yourself by going back and reading the text fully.

They Creep and Crawl at Insectarium

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. (AP)—Five-year-old Andrew Belcher was about to eat a worm, but he dropped it on the floor before he could pop it in his mouth.

“You don’t want to eat that!” Christi Cullen warned.

The young museum guide fished out a new cheese-covered worm and handed it to him.

“Tastes like a cheese doodle,” Andrew said.

Cheese-covered meal worms are one of the many treats awaiting brave-hearted, strong-stomached visitors to the Philadelphia Insectarium. If it creeps, crawls, stings, or bites, you will probably find it here. Some of the specimens in the 6,000 square-foot museum are alive in natural habitats. The rest weren’t so lucky—they’re mounted on the walls.

Part zoo, part museum, the Insectarium has been delighting children and grossing out their parents since 1992. It’s owned and operated by a man who has made a career of killing bugs: Steve Kanya of Steve’s Bug-Off, an exterminating company housed in the same building.

Kanya opened his museum after he noticed children stopping to look at his catches of the day—a motley collection of rats, mice, and insects that he put in the window to attract business.

His museum workers are old bug hands.

“When I was young, I was always the one out digging in the dirt and picking up worms and saying, ‘Ooh! Look at this!’”’ Director Maureen Kennedy said.

The museum shows off insects from around the world, including bugs that look like ordinary tree leaves and insects so ornate that they are worn as living jewelry in Mexico.

Visitors are allowed to touch many of the dead bugs from Africa, Asia, and Australia.

The star attraction is a most unpopular visitor—the American cockroach. In the museum’s “Cockroach Kitchen,” thousands live amid linoleum and wooden cabinets in a glass display case.

The museum aims to teach children that insects do more than sting, bite, and annoy; they’re a vital part of the ecosystem: termites dispose of fallen trees, millipedes stir up dirt to make room for the plants and bees, and butterflies pollinate flowers.

“Without bugs, the world would be very different,” Mrs. Kennedy said. “It’d be a lot dirtier, and probably not as pretty.”
a. What is on display at the Philadelphia Insectarium?

b. How did Steve Kanya get the idea of opening a museum filled with bugs?

c. How are dead insects exhibited in the 6,000 square foot space?

d. The museum features insects from around the world. Name two interesting facts about these specimens.

e. According to the story, which bugs are visitors allowed to touch?

f. In what way do millipedes help the ecosystem (community of plants and animals)?