Reading as a Technical Writer

Dr. Jim Henry - University of Hawai'i at Manoa (jmhenry@hawaii.edu)

Different forms of writing often imply different processes of reading. This reading procedure will help you hone your self-awareness of textual forms and effects. Practice it and adapt it to your own needs and circumstances.

Before you begin reading, be sure to read and study the author’s Document Review Form so that you clearly understand the purpose of the document and can identify with the intended audience.

First Reading: Scan the Entire Document Quickly
Scan all pages of the document quickly to get a sense of the whole. Next blur your vision and attend to page layouts for balance and white space vs. black space. Quickly note the relationship of text to images. Jot down your first impression & expectations.

Second Reading: Assess Overall Organization
Scan the document again, this time for titles, subtitles, major headers, and other organizational clues. Refer to the Document Review Form during this reading to see if your impressions and the writer’s intentions coincide at this level. Note divergences.

Third Reading: Track Your First Encounter, Word for Word
Take pencil or pen in hand. Read very slowly, word for word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, with the pencil poised above the sheet. Each time you hesitate for even the briefest instant, underline that place in the text. Do not reflect as to why you have hesitated. Simply mark the spot and continue reading, to the end of the document. This reading is critical because it serves to designate the material for your next reading. It is imperative that you follow this procedure closely in order to catch problems that will later elude you once you are familiar with content.

Fourth Reading: Qualify Your First Encounter
Return to the top of the document and begin rereading. At each marked passage, qualify above the text or in the margins the reason for your hesitation. Your qualification may be expressed in conventional categories (“fault in parallelism”), or in specific (even idiosyncratic) terms (“I can’t follow the logic in the jump from this topic to this topic.”) You may make suggestions for improving the passage in question (“What if you were to insert subheads?”)

Fifth Reading: Edit for Technical Style
Shift into the "Editor" mindset. Bring to bear upon the text your own Editing Checklist, looking for errors or oversight in systematic fashion. Scrutinizing the document for clarity, conciseness, and grammar and punctuation, make as many "passes" over the document as necessary to check for common errors in technical documents and reports. Your checklist should include at least the following: parallelism, misplaced modifiers, dangling modifiers, nominalizations, passive constructions, wordiness, pronoun agreement, sexist language, hedge words, and punctuation. You may want to add other errors. Use our text and other reference book to compose your own checklist for this reading during the semester.

Sixth Reading: Evaluate the Ethos
Take a break for a minute or two, then return to the document for one last reading at the global level. During the break, ponder the writer's audience, purpose, and contexts in which the document will be used. Does this document seem complete and accurate? Also ponder the ethos that you have perceived during the other readings. Is it appropriate? Adequate? Can you imagine possible misunderstandings or catastrophes? What cultural values does the implied author of this text convey, and how do you evaluate them?