

■ What is reading?

Reading is one of the four language **skills**: reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is a **receptive skill**, like listening. This means it involves responding to text, rather than producing it. Very simply we can say that reading involves making sense of text. To do this we need to understand the language of the text at word level, sentence level and whole-text level. We also need to connect the message of the text to our knowledge of the world. Look at this sentence, for example:

The boy was surprised because the girl was much faster at running than he was.

To understand this sentence, we need to understand what the letters are, how the letters join together to make words, what the words mean and the grammar of the words and the sentence. But we also make sense of this sentence by knowing that, generally speaking, girls do not run as fast as boys. Our knowledge of the world helps us understand why the boy was surprised.

■ Key concepts

Can you think of reasons why learners may find reading difficult?

A text is usually longer than just a word or a sentence. It often contains a series of sentences, as in a letter or even a postcard. These sentences are connected to one another by grammar and vocabulary and/or knowledge of the world. Reading also involves understanding the connection between sentences. For example:

The boy was surprised because the girl was much faster at running than he was. Then he found out that her mother had won a medal for running at the Olympic Games.

The second sentence gives us a possible reason why the girl was so good at running. But we can only understand that this is a reason if we know that Olympic runners are very good. This means we need to use our knowledge of the world to see the connection between these two sentences (**coherence**). The grammatical links between the sentences (**cohesion**) also help us see the connection between them. For example, in the second example sentence 'he' refers to 'the boy' in the first sentence, and 'her' refers to 'the girl'.

When we read we do not necessarily read everything in a text. What we read depends on why and how we are reading. For example, we may read a travel website to find a single piece of information about prices. But we may read a novel in great detail because we like the story and the characters and want to know as much as we can about them.

These examples show us that we read different text types and we read for different reasons. Some examples of written text types are letters, articles, postcards, stories, information brochures, leaflets and poems. All these kinds of text types are different from one another. They have different lengths, layouts (the ways in which text is placed on the page), topics and kinds of language. Learning to read also involves learning how to handle these different text types.

Our reasons for reading influence how we read, i.e. which reading **subskill** (a skill that is part of a main skill) we use. For example, if we read a text just to find a specific piece or pieces of information in it, we usually use a subskill called **reading for specific information** or **scanning**. When we scan, we don't read the whole text. We hurry over most of it until we find the information we are interested in, e.g. when we look for a number in a telephone directory.

Another reading subskill is **reading for gist** or **skimming**, i.e. reading quickly through a text to get a general idea of what it is about. For example, you skim when you look quickly through a book in a bookshop to decide if you want to buy it, or when you go quickly through a reference book to decide which part will help you write an essay.

A third reading subskill is **reading for detail**. If you read a letter from someone you love who you haven't heard from for a long time, you probably read like this, getting the meaning out of every word.

Another way of reading is **extensive reading**. Extensive reading involves reading long pieces of text, for example a story or an article. As you read, your attention and interest vary – you may read some parts of the text in detail while you may skim through others.

Sometimes, especially in language classrooms, we use texts to examine language. For example, we might ask learners to look for all the words in a text related to a particular topic, or work out the grammar of a particular sentence. The aim of these activities is to make learners more aware of how language is used. These activities are sometimes called **intensive reading**. They are not a reading skill, but a language learning activity.

We can see that reading is a complicated process. It involves understanding letters, words and sentences, understanding the connections between sentences (coherence and cohesion), understanding different text types, making sense of the text through our knowledge of the world and using the appropriate reading subskill. Reading may be a receptive skill but it certainly isn't a passive one!