How to Predict the Contents and Structure of a Text

PROBLEM: You're missing out.

You have been reading along in a very time-consuming text and have finally reached the last paragraph of the chapter. *El fin!*, you think to yourself. However, you realize that you have no recollection whatsoever of how this last paragraph ties into the first paragraph. In fact, you have no clue about how the sequences of ideas relate at all. You look at the title of the essay which has something to do with Sir Gawain and The Incredible Hulk and you say to yourself, “Hmmm. This chapter was probably sort of interesting. Too bad I missed it.” How could you have more successfully followed the sequence of ideas?

SOLUTION: Learn to predict.

One way to increase your level (and speed) of comprehension is to consciously attempt to *predict* the content and structure of a text. By following a few simple steps, you can figure out what a text is talking about and where it’s headed *before* you finish reading.

WHAT DO I GET OUT OF IT?

Aside from substantially cutting your reading time, you will be able to

- better remember the content after reading
- see how the various ideas relate (or don’t relate) to one another
- respond logically and intelligently about the structure of the essay
- analyze the strength of the argument
- assess your level of perception as a critical reader

HOW DO I DO IT? Here comes the exciting part.

The best ways to predict the content and structure of a text include *previewing* the text, assessing the questions raised by the text, and identifying how ideas are structurally related. If you preview a text and read with questions in mind, the content of the text will fall into a more logical structure which will render the information more meaningful and easy to remember. By identifying the structure of ideas, you can better understand the various parts of the text and can predict how the author will attempt to connect them.

**#1. PREVIEW** - Sneak a preview at the text you’re reading. Note the following information and turn each item into a question:

- textual details at the beginning and end: title, author, preface, table of contents, appendices, index, etc. What is the genre? Who is the intended audience?
- structural organization: summary statements, headings/subheadings, graphs,
illustrations, guide questions. Why did the author set it up this way?

- **Content** of first and last few paragraphs: What is the main idea sentence? What is the tone? The purpose? The point of view?

You should be able to make some predictions about the content and structure already.

#2. **ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS** and **FIND THE STRUCTURE**

**QUESTIONS**

When reading to predict, it is essential to develop the skills needed to decipher what information is relevant in a text and what is irrelevant. You must not only read with questions in mind, but must also learn how to ask the right kinds of questions. Here are some suggestions:

- **Just from the title, decide what you already know and what you need to know.**
  Are there any new or unfamiliar words? Can you predict what sort of position the author has taken?

- **Identify Key Words and formulate questions.**
  As you read, mentally or physically jot down key words that seem significant (words that are emphasized, unfamiliar, repeated, in boldface, etc.). Ask yourself, How are the key words interrelated? How do they build on one another?

- **Pay attention to the contract that the author promises to fulfill.**
  With the title, thesis, and main ideas, an author necessarily commits to delivering certain pieces of information to you, the reader. If a title reads, “Subversion and Containment in *The Grapes of Wrath,*” the author has basically made a contract with you to explain a) what subversion and containment means and b) how it relates to Steinbeck’s book. From the very beginning of the essay, you are predicting and forming expectations about the text. A conscientious writer will be sure to fulfill her promises.

**STRUCTURE**

- **Read for textual clues regarding the arrangement of ideas.**
  Just as authors make contracts regarding the content of the paper, they often make textual contracts regarding the structure as well. If a writer begins an essay with, “There are three steps to planting a health garden,” expect and be on the lookout for a discussion of three different procedures.

- **Note the main idea of each paragraph.**
  The building blocks of a text’s structure are the paragraphs. Each paragraph should add new information and work toward fleshing out the thesis. How does the main idea of each paragraph relate to the thesis?

- **Analyze how the ideas build on one another.**
As readers, we can assume that authors organize their works with specific purposes in mind. As you read, ask yourself. Why did the author organize the material in this way? With a structure such as this, where is the essay leading?

After virtually every sentence, your content and structure questions can and will be modified.

EXAMPLE

Here is an example of how you might predict the content and structure of an essay. Study the following excerpt, focusing on the three areas of annotation and the predictions.

"Claiming an Education" by Adrienne Rich - Dialogues and Conversations, page 53

For this convocation, I planned to separate my remarks into two parts: some thoughts about you, the women students here, and some thoughts about us who teach in a women's college. But ultimately, those two parts are indivisible. If university education means anything beyond the processing of human beings into expected roles, through credit hours, tests, and grades...it implies an ethical and intellectual contract between teacher and student. This contract must remain intuitive, dynamic, unwritten; but we must turn to it again and again if learning is to be reclaimed from the depersonalizing and cheapening pressures of the present-day academic scene.

Key Words: contract "reclaiming" learning

Structure: 2 groups (students and teachers) addressed as 1 group - will become part of contract definition.

Questions: What does the 2-part contract entail? How does one "claim an education"? Why must the contract remain "intuitive, dynamic, unwritten"? In what way is the present-day academic scene "depersonalizing" and characterized by "cheapening pressures"? How will this contract reclaim education for women (and perhaps men)?

Predictions:

* Rich will further explain what is involved in the contract and will answer the questions her introduction has raised.

The first thing I want to say to you who are students is that you cannot afford to think of being here to receive an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one. One of the dictionary definitions of the verb "to claim" is: to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction. "To receive" is to come into possession of; to act as receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true. The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon, and for women it can literally mean the difference between life and death.

Key Words: receive vs. claim

Structure: Narrows focus on students Contrasts terms in order to define them

Questions: Why do women especially need to be aware of the difference between acting and being acted upon? "Reclaim" from what? How?
Predictions:

* Rich will go on to explain exactly how students—especially women—can reclaim their educations.

One of the devastating weaknesses of university learning, of the store of knowledge and opinion that has been handed down through academic training, has been its almost total erasure of women's experience and thought from the curriculum, and its exclusion of women as members of the academic community. Today, with increasing numbers of women students in nearly every branch of higher learning, we still see very few women in the upper levels of faculty and administration in most institutions. . . . But the most significant fact for you is that what you learn here, the very texts you read, the lectures you hear, the way your studies are divided into categories and fragmented one from the other—all this reflects, to a very large degree, neither objective reality, nor an accurate picture of the past, nor a group of rigorously tested observations about human behavior. What you can learn here . . . is how men have perceived and organized their experience, their history, their ideas of social relationships, good and evil, sickness and health, etc. When you read or hear about “great issues,” “major texts,” “the mainstream of Western thought,” you are hearing about what men, above all white men, in their male subjectivity, have decided is important.

**KEY WORDS:**
erasure of women's experience

**STRUCTURE:**
Contrast between male space/female space in academia

**QUESTIONS:**
Women need to reclaim a space in academic studies. How is this done? Still, what is the connection with the contract between student/teacher?

Predictions:

* Rich will tie this notion of reclaiming a female space in education with the contract between student and teacher.

At this point, the student would continue reading, predicting, and asking questions regarding the essay. When finished, the student would be able to look back at her predictions and analyze why her predictions did or did not come true.

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