

For most of us, time is scarce. We're busy, and we don't want to read junk. So what to do?

One of my [Shreve] teachers was a scholarly man who's business kept him on the road for weeks at a time. He travelled with an executive assistant who typed up his notes, made calls, and did whatever else was needed to make the odd moments of his boss's day productive. Among these chores was bookstore shopping. The teacher had wide-ranging interests in philosophy, the social sciences, cognition, and computers. The bookstore list included a dozen titles a week which he would methodically read along with the *Wall Street Journal*, a local newspaper, and trade journals. He shared with his students how he was able to do this prodigious volume of reading in addition to a full day of meetings and presentations.

He prioritized and chose carefully before reading thoroughly. As we recommend, he screened his sources. The books and periodicals he chose to buy weren't random. They were chosen because they had potential for a new perspective or new information in his fields of interest. With the publications in hand, he'd do a quick sort, determining if each book was of interest by scanning the summary and conclusions. That eliminated most of the stack. He asserts that many authors don't really have much that's genuinely new to say. He bought many books that he never fully read. In the periodicals, he dog-eared things he wanted to read. Scanning the table of contents and headlines gave him an overview of what topics were causing a "buzz," but he didn't attempt to read most of them. Occasionally something would click as an investment opportunity or news of a breakthrough in

his field of interest. So in half an hour or so he had identified his reading for the evening and for the odd free moments of the next day.

How to Scan an Article Quickly

Scan strategically. Before actually reading for comprehension, determine if the content is of interest. Most of us do this automatically when paging through a newspaper or magazine. We skim the headlines for items of interest.

Note the title of the article. A good title will give you a sense of the content and the angle or focus the author has. If you read the title and are left wondering what the article is about, that's a sign that the content might not be worth your investment of time. Titles often reveal the article's intended effect on readers. Does the subject trigger curiosity, fear, anger, outrage, or hope? Does it inform and summarize?

Is the author known to you and should you care what he or she has to say about the matter? Does the writer have special expertise, a fresh perspective, or a reputation that makes his or her work significant?

Turning to the content, quick insights about content can come from illustrations or photos and their captions. Graphics are eye-catching, and you can be attracted (or repelled) by non-verbal elements of any media. The editorial choice of photos, like the title, reveals the intent. What facial expressions are captured? Are they flattering? What appears to be the intent of including this particular graphic? What mood is triggered by the visuals?

These observations may be enough to reject the content outright and move on. If still interested, skim.

Read only the first sentence of a few paragraphs. If the article is well-written, the author follows the customary rule that the lead sentence contains the gist of its paragraph. Train yourself to refrain from the natural tendency to continue reading beyond the first sentence. Skimming gives a feel for the tone and breadth of the author's treatment of the subject. You will soon know if the content is worth your attention.

Jump to the concluding paragraph and read it. It might be a single sentence or a few sentences. The author should tie up his/her argument here, and by reading this last section, you can get an idea what a close reading of the full content might hold for you.

Have a question in mind. What is *your* intent? Are you seeking entertainment, specific information, local news, world news, political insight, self-help, spiritual guidance? What future actions will your scanning inform?

I often clip periodical articles that are not actionable immediately. I may be interested in connection with a future writing project, but I recognize that I may not retain the information if I simply read it at the moment I first see it.

Using the scanning technique, you are not reading in a linear way from beginning to middle to the end. You hop around getting the lay of the land, zero in on the best bits, and skip over whole sections when they aren't of interest. Scanning lets you plan the use of your reading time.

Reflection as you scan or read is key. You read to find what's new, useful and accessible. This requires that you be aware of your process and also evaluate the content on the fly. If the article or book is of high interest, you decide when you will delve deeper.

The world is full of wonderful and interesting information. Page down to what matters quickly by being strategic as you read.

How to Spot Skepticism Triggers

Let's suppose that you've found an article in the magazine section of your paper that's of interest. You don't recognize the author, and it's not attributable to any institutional source. How can you evaluate credibility?

Every writer has a voice and a style, actually a *palate* of styles. How something is said may be as important as what is said. Certain features should trigger your skepticism. We should note that skepticism is not cynicism: cynics see no hope and promote despair. Skepticism is also *not* negative; it's another word for "authentic doubt" for it fosters asking good questions. Honest skeptics are open to authentic, accurate information. Let us use intellect and be curious, hopeful, visionary, and also know what to watch for so we don't get snookered.

<p>SKEPTICISM IS NOT CYNACISM</p>
--

important as what is said. Certain features should trigger your skepticism. We should note that skepticism is not cynicism: cynics

see no hope and promote despair. Skepticism

is also *not* negative; it's another word for "authentic doubt" for it fosters asking good questions. Honest skeptics are open to authentic, accurate information.

Let us use intellect and be curious, hopeful, visionary, and also know what to watch for so we don't get snookered.

Here is my list of signs and signals that herald an argument that is not grounded in objective fact:

Skepticism Triggers [edited]

Richmond Shreve, *OpEdNews* 10/13/2009

1. Extreme or **absolute** phrasing. (Words like *always* and *never* which allow for no exceptions.)

2. **Characterizations**. Adjectives that attribute merit or adjectives that demean without factual support; stereotyping, epithets, smack talk (e.g. lowlife, retard), slurs, sneers, honorifics, cloaking (e.g. famous, notorious). (“Outstanding authority John Smith...” “Discredited activist judge Jim Jones...”)

3. Citation of **anonymous authority**. (“A nationally famous physician states...”)

4. **Absence of contrary** information. (Writer withholds or fails to discuss dissenting opinion and conflicting data).

5. **Ad homonym** arguments that appeal to feelings rather than reason. (Many rants are passionate and evoke prejudices while lacking factual substance.)

6. **Ad homonym phrasing** that attacks the character of an individual.

7. **Innuendo**, insinuation, an indirect statement that implies something without actually asserting it; amplification of a trivial detail; sarcasm, satire, ridicule.

8. Metaphors and similes that **grossly oversimplify**, usually diverting attention from the inconvenient complexity of reality (effective way to finesse flawed logic); use of tropes, clichés, memes. (More on tropes and memes below.)

9. **Denial**. The refusal to even consider well known conflicting information, dismissing it or ignoring it.

10. **Sophism**. Clever or fallacious argument

that leads to a wrong conclusion. Sophism can look like a rational, reasonable argument, but usually ignores some facts and embellishes others to make a case. Connecting some of the dots, omitting others, to show a false pattern. that imagines or creates meaning from noise.

11. **Misapplied authority.** Seeking to attribute authority to the opinion of someone whose expertise does not extend to the topic. (e.g. the medical opinions of a disk jockey).

12. **Emotional manipulation:** outrage, pity, hate, fear, pathos, other appeals to mood; fear mongering.

13. **Hidden agenda** cues: dismissive tone, money motive (shock jocks, click bait), obvious lack of balance (partisan), errors (poor grammar, spelling, word usage).

14. **Sensational assertions.**

15. Claims or statements that are **too good or too bad to be true.**

16. Arguments that assert a **conspiracy** that would be hard to conceal—one that would require the silent complicity of a large number of people. (in real life, leaks happen, whistle-blowers surface, etc.).

17. Writing that **sounds like a sales pitch** (one-sided and persuasively phrased. Infomercial-speak).

18. Statements that **infer a hidden motive** or agenda. (Political mud-slinging).

19. **Absence of obvious questions** that an objective author would anticipate and answer.

20. **Absence of independent sources** and externally verifiable fact patterns. No references.

21. Use of a **false name or handle** to obscure the author's identity and avoid accountability.

22. **Extrapolation of a peripheral issue** to discredit or embellish a core issue. (The sexual behavior of a judge or authority as evidence to question his competence in law); extrapolation of unrelated attributes (wealth, beauty, fame, power, personality, etc.).

23. **Anecdotes** as evidence of a general truth. ("My cousin got the flu after he was vaccinated."). But anecdotes can illustrate factual statistics when they are representative. ("Like 2% of all those who get the vaccine, my cousin had a mild fever reaction.")

24. **Missing considerations**: attributing cause to correlation, or conversely not investigating correlation as a pointer to possible cause.

25. **Mendacity**: falsehoods, lies, fabricated context (spin, framing), misleading graphics and altered photos, words taken out of context, "borrowed" authority or status (flag, props, clothes, setting).

26. **Non-accountability and dirty tricks**: lack of peer review; timing to prevent rebuttal; asymmetrical media (viral email); shell organizations; astro-turfing (phony grass-roots organizations); dark money (anonymous funding sources).

If you spot multiple triggers anywhere but in the opinion section of the newspaper, be skeptical; the article likely lacks authenticity and is probably not credible. Opinion pieces and certain articles intended to persuade or entertain may be credible but still deserve scrutiny for deception. Charged language is an expression of passion, and we don't expect balance from advocates (or salesmen).