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Signal Words

Does your mind seem to wander when you're reading? This happens to almost everyone at some time or another. You're reading along and suddenly you're thinking about what's for lunch today. You find yourself a few paragraphs later with no idea of what you've just read. Your eyes skimmed over the words, but your mind didn't comprehend them. Now, you've got to go back and re-read the whole section.



This time, read more actively. This will help your mind engage with the words your eyes are seeing. One way to do this is to look for signal words in the text. Signal words and phrases give you directions. They tell you where you're going as well as where you've been.

Signal words can be divided into categories based on the clues they give as you read. They may signal you to read on, that important information is coming up. Conclusions and summaries are also preceded by signal words. Signal words can show that an example or a definition is coming up. Others may show cause and effect or comparison and contrast. They may tell you to revise your thinking. Picking up on these red flags as you read can greatly help your comprehension.

Words and phrases such as "first," "in addition," and "next" tell you that there is more information on the way. When your eyes see these, they signal your brain to read on. You may want to slow your reading rate in order to pick up the important points. Other examples of words that tell you to read on, this is important, are "above all," "chief factor," and "major."

"Finally" and "therefore" are words that signal a conclusion. The writer is going to wrap up the topic. Words such as "in summary" and "in conclusion" tell your brain that the writer is going to restate the main points of the article. This should tell you to make sure you read to understand and remember these points.

Writers often give examples of important concepts in words that are simple to understand. They may also do you a favor and define important vocabulary words in the context. This saves you from having to look them up on your own. It also helps you to better comprehend what you are reading. Red flags that signal explanations or definitions include "for example," "such as," "defined as," and "means the same as."

Cause and effect and comparison and contrast are important comprehension skills. They may also be difficult skills to master. Words and phrases like "for this reason," "as a result," and "consequently" signal a cause and effect relationship. They tell you that one event caused another to happen. Comparison and contrast words include "similarity," "difference," and "opposite." They tell you how two things are alike or different. These words can direct you to go back and re-read to make sure that you understand the relationships the author is discussing.

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Some signal words tell you to revise your thinking. Suppose you read, "It was a sunny day." You may think of warm temperatures. Then you read, "Yet, there was a chill in the air." The word "yet" signals you to think again; it's not warm even though it is sunny. Other words that flag a change in thinking include "however," "but," "nevertheless," and "in spite of."

Signals tell you to pay attention. Think of signal words in text as traffic lights. They tell you to stop, go, or proceed with caution. Watching for signal words as you read will help to focus your attention. Your mind won't wander, and you will be better able to understand and remember what you have read.

Signal Words

Questions

1. Name two categories of signal words or phrases.

- _____ 2. Signal phrases such as "in addition" and "chief factor" tell you:

- A. read on, this is important
- B. stop, change your thinking
- C. pay attention, a definition is coming

- _____ 3. Phrases such as "in summary" and "in conclusion" tell you that the writer is going to:

- A. restate major points
- B. give additional information
- C. change your thinking

4. Give two words or phrases that tell you a definition or explanation is coming up.

- _____ 5. Cause and effect signal words:

- A. show how one event caused another
- B. give clues to definitions of vocabulary words
- C. tell you that more information is coming up

6. Write a sentence using a signal word that tells you to change your thinking.

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How many of these can you write about? Think! Write! Check all the ones you answered.

- Read two paragraphs in one of your textbooks. Make a list of signal words or phrases you find. Then write a paragraph telling what each of these signal words or phrases tells you to do.
- Do you think that looking for signal words can help your comprehension? Give reasons for your answer.
