

Make Your Writing Skim-Proof to Dramatically Increase Your Story's Reading Time

Here's how to wage war on those dirty little skimmers

You have 1 free member-only story left this month.



Photo by Marissa Lewis on Unsplash

Readers are dirty little skimmers.

I'm a reader. And I'll skim through your writing with zero f**ks given. What are you going to do about it? Lock me

up? There is a problem. Writer [Shannon Ashley](#) destroyed my ability to skim. Every time I read her stories I try and skim through them because they can be quite long.

My skimming technique doesn't work. I find myself skimming her work, getting to the end, missing all the goodies, and going right back to the start again to read every word from scratch. This happens every time. You'd think I would have learned by now not to skim her writing. Nope.

Why do readers skim?

1. Readers want to save time

Skimming is a [time-saving habit](#). Why read a 10-minute story when you can skim through it and read it in 46 seconds? This is the mindset of a reader. Understanding the habits of a reader are key to get them to actually read your stories and boost your overall read time.

Views = Useless

Why are view stats bad? Views don't tell you who read your story from start to finish and who click, skimmed and left you for dead. Most *views* are readers who skimmed your story. Skimming is bad for you as a writer.

Readers who skim your work are highly unlikely to come back or to share your story. You end up wasting your time

to write a beautiful story readers will never fully read. Skimmable stories have a very low reading time.

2. They've probably read ten bad stories before yours

There is so much bad writing online, dressed up with a soul-destroying headline to take advantage of you. Readers have to read so many bad stories to find a gem amongst hundreds. The only way to crawl through the volume of stories readers have dumped on them is to skim.

Skimming prevents the value transfer

Context helps your writing stick. The value transfer lies in reading the whole story, not parts of it.

Skimming prevents the reader from understanding what you're trying to say, or from understanding the definition of terms, or from picking up on the subtleties that hold hidden value. If skimming really did work then you could skip to the last line of most stories and get the point the writer was trying to make. This is, in fact, a myth.

The trend in self-help enabling skimmers

A new technique I've seen self-help writers use is to make their content actionable. There is nothing wrong with this. But the problem is in the way it's done. Writers use subheadings like "how to do it" or "takeaway" or "strategy you can implement." Readers get so obsessed with the action part that they skip the story. Intentionally labeling these action points leads them astray.

Readers end up only seeing "meditate every day" and thinking it's useless advice or a cliché tip they've seen before. The best action tips are the ones hidden in your story. The best lessons from a story are the ones the writer didn't know they were leaving behind. Read a good essay. You'll notice they're not full of sections littered with "takeaway."

Powerful stories that change your life often don't point out the lesson.

There's a place for actionable formatting. The downside is it's enabling skimmers to get the takeaways quickly from your writing and never do anything with them.

Bolding sentences is treating your readers as if they are deaf, dumb, and stupid

Michael Thompson once said to me "who are you to decide what quotes in your story are valuable?" His

writing advice made me think.

I used to bold sentences like an out of control influencer taking a stream of 300 selfies all at once. Half the story would end up full of bold formatting. Bolding is for amateur writers. Bolding doesn't promote the useful kind of skimming either. Bolding is an eye-sore. Bolding is mostly overused.

Your readers are not dumb. They don't need you to point out what they should read as if they're a moron who has never read before. You don't read a book you buy from Amazon with every second line bolded. Why is blogging or social media posts any different? Bolding is supposed to draw attention to a point. Instead, bolding ruins your writing.

Bolding sentences is pissing on a Picasso.

The skim-proof strategy you can utilize to increase your reading time

You can go full Shannon Ashley if you want. You can use no formatting and simply use page breaks (3 dots) to break up your sections.

The big publications do this. Skimmers can't skim if there is no formatting to guide them. The more formatting you use the more skimming you activate. Overformatting creates a nasty little skimmer. As the writer, you're in

control.

The blogging courses are wrong. Don't throw formatting around like a drunk.

The solution is to think of every subheading as an opportunity for a reader to skim. I don't personally use zero formatting, and that's not the point of this article. I use conscious formatting and keep skimmers front and center. Here's a mantra: "What formatting am I using to destroy this story?" I find it's good to format your story as you write and then dial back the formatting during the editing process.

Too much formatting is a cry for attention, not a smart strategy to make your writing easier to read.

I was reading an interesting story the other day, and accidentally scrolled away from where I was up to. The story had no subheadings, quotes, or links in it. "It's easy to get lost in unformatted writing," I thought. Maybe that's the point. To get lost in a story is beautiful.

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