How to identify main points when reading

One of the most important steps in understanding an academic text is to be able to spot the main points. Here are some tips to help you:

1. Firstly, you should always know **WHY** you are reading a text. If you know why you are reading, you will usually know what you are looking for and be able to discard the less important points.

2. Secondly, check **what kind of text you are reading** and be aware of how the information is usually structured within such a text. For example:
   - In a **text-book** you will often be guided to the main points with headings and sub-headings. Use the index and contents page to get an overview of topics covered.
   - In a **journal article** you will be able to get a good idea of the main points from the abstract at the beginning.
   - In a **chapter in an edited collection** you may need to find out how the editor has decided to present information in the different chapters within the book – there will be a pattern. You may need to check the introduction of the book for some hints about content and purpose.
   - In an **official report or document**, you will usually be guided by headings and sub-headings. There may be an executive summary at the beginning of the document to help you understand the key points. Or you may need to skim the full document, searching for information relevant to your purpose.

3. Thirdly, check the intended **audience** of the document. Perhaps it was written for students (usually this is the case with text-books) or academic researchers (journal articles) or the general public (government or international reports). The intended audience may affect the organisation of the main points.

4. Fourthly, follow these general tips:
   - Scan through the **chapter headings** of a book on the contents page before starting to read. There may only be one or two chapters that are relevant to your purpose.
   - Scan through the **headings** of any text before you start reading closely. This will give you an idea of how the information will be presented.
   - Pay a lot of attention to the **introduction and the conclusion**. Reading both of these first will give a nice summary of what is said in the text.
• Look for ‘topic sentences’. These are usually the first sentence of each paragraph and they often contain a key point, which is then expanded in the rest of the paragraph.

• Look at diagrams, graphs, tables and images. These often condense the information that is in the text and help to present it in a more visual way.

• If you are reading a journal article, spend time on the abstract first. This should give a very good overview of the whole article and you should be able to identify the main points from the text here.

• Be very aware of the ‘signposting’ or ‘linking’ words in a text. These are words such as however, conversely, consequently, etc. They can guide you through an author’s argument.