



Suggestions for Improving Reading Speed

Improvement of Reading Rate

It is safe to say that almost anyone can double his or her speed of reading while maintaining equal or even better comprehension. In other words, you can improve the speed with which you get what you want from your reading.

The average college student reads between 250 and 350 words per minute on fiction and non-technical materials. A "good" reading speed is around 500 to 700 words per minute, but some people can read 1000 words per minute or more on these materials.

What makes the difference? There are three main factors involved in improving reading speed: (1) the desire to improve, (2) the willingness to try new techniques and (3) the motivation to practice.

Learning to read rapidly and well presupposes that you have the necessary vocabulary and comprehension skills. When you have advanced on the reading comprehension materials to a level at which you can understand college-level materials, you will be ready to practice speed reading in earnest.

The Role of Speed in the Reading Process

Understanding the role of speed in the reading process is essential. Research shows a close relation between speed and understanding—although it is the opposite of what you might expect! Among thousands of individuals taking reading training, in most cases an increase in rate was accompanied by an increase in comprehension, and a decrease in rate brought decreased comprehension with it. It appears that plodding, word-by-word analysis inhibits rather than increases understanding.

Most adults are able to increase their reading rate considerably and rather quickly without lowering their comprehension. These same individuals usually show a *decrease* in comprehension when they reduce their rate. Such results, of course, are heavily dependent upon the method used to gain the increased rate. Simply reading more rapidly without actual improvement in basic reading habits usually results in lowered comprehension.

Factors that Reduce Reading Rate

1. Limited perceptual span (word-by-word reading)
2. Slow perceptual reaction time (slow recognition and response to the material)
3. Vocalization (reading aloud)

4. Faulty eye movements (including inaccuracy in placement of the page, in return sweep, in rhythm and regularity of movement, etc.)
5. Regression (needless or unconscious re-reading)
6. Faulty habits of attention and concentration (including simple inattention during the reading act and faulty processes of retention)
7. Lack of practice in reading—use it or lose it!
8. Fear of losing comprehension, causing the person to deliberately read more slowly
9. Habitual slow reading, in which the person cannot read faster because he or she has always read slowly
10. Poor evaluation of which aspects are important and which are unimportant
11. The effort to remember everything rather than to remember selectively

Since these conditions also tend to reduce comprehension, increasing the reading rate by eliminating them is likely to produce increased comprehension, too. This is entirely different from simply speeding up the rate of reading—which may actually make the real reading problem more severe. In addition, forced acceleration may destroy confidence in one's ability to read. The obvious solution, then, is to increase rate as a part of a total improvement of the whole reading process, as special training programs in reading do.

Basic Conditions for Increased Reading Rate

A well-planned program prepares for maximum increase in rate by establishing the necessary conditions. Four basic conditions include:

1. **Have your eyes checked.** Often, very slow reading is related to uncorrected eye defects. Before embarking on a speed reading program, make sure that any correctable eye defects you may have are taken care of.
2. **Eliminate the habit of pronouncing words as you read.** If you sound out words in your throat or whisper them, your reading rate is slowed considerably. You should be able to read most materials at least two or three times faster silently than orally, because you can get meaning from phrases without reading each word individually. If you are aware of sounding or "hearing" words as you read, try to concentrate on key words and meaningful ideas as you force yourself to read faster.
3. **Avoid regressing (rereading).** The average student reading at 250 words per minute regresses or rereads about 20 times per page. Rereading words and phrases is a habit which will slow your reading

speed down to a snail's pace. Usually, it is unnecessary to reread words, for the ideas you want are explained and elaborated more fully later. Furthermore, the slowest reader usually regresses most frequently. Because he reads slowly, his mind has time to wander and his rereading reflects both his inability to concentrate and his lack of confidence in his comprehension skills.

4. **Develop a wider eye-span.** This will help you read more than one word at a glance. Since written material is less meaningful if read word by word, this will help you learn to read by phrases or thought units.

Rate Adjustment

Poor results are inevitable if the reader attempts to use the same rate for all types of material and for all reading purposes. He must learn to adjust his rate to his purpose in reading and to the difficulty of the material. The fastest rate works on easy, familiar, interesting material or in reading to gather information on a particular point. A slower rate is better for material which is unfamiliar in content and language structure or which must be thoroughly digested. The effective reader adjusts his rate; the ineffective reader always uses the same.

Rate may be adjusted overall for an entire article, or internally for parts of an article. As an analogy, imagine that you plan to take a 100-mile mountain trip. Since this trip will include hills, curves, and a mountain pass, you estimate it will take three hours for the total trip, averaging about 35 miles an hour. This is your overall rate adjustment. In actual driving, however, you may slow down to no more than 15 miles per hour on some curves and hills, while speeding up to 50 miles per hour or more on relatively straight and level sections. This is your internal rate adjustment. Similarly, there is no set rate which the good reader follows inflexibly in reading a particular selection, even though he has set himself an overall rate for the total job.

Reading rate should vary according to your reading purpose. To understand information, for example, skim or scan at a rapid rate. To determine the value of material or to read for enjoyment, read rapidly or slowly according to your feeling. To read analytically, read at a moderate pace to permit you to interrelate ideas.

The nature and difficulty of the material also calls for adjustments in rate. Obviously, level of difficulty depends greatly on the particular reader's knowledge. While Einstein's theories may be extremely difficult for most laymen, they would be very simple and clear to a professor of physics. Hence, the layman and the physics professor will read the same material at different rates. Generally, difficult material will entail a slower rate; simpler material will permit a faster rate.

In general, *decrease* speed when you find the following:

1. **Unfamiliar terminology.** Try to understand it in context at that point; otherwise, read on and return to it later.
2. **Difficult sentence and paragraph structure.** Slow down enough to enable you to untangle them and

get accurate context for the passage.

3. **Unfamiliar or abstract concepts.** Look for applications or examples of your own as well as studying those of the writer. Take enough time to get them clearly in mind.
4. **Detailed, technical material.** This includes complicated directions, statements of difficult principles, and materials on which you have scant background.
5. **Material on which you want detailed retention.**

In general, *increase* speed when you meet the following:

1. **Simple material with few ideas which are new to you.** Move rapidly over the familiar ones; spend most of your time on the unfamiliar ideas.
2. **Unnecessary examples and illustrations.** Since these are included to clarify ideas, move over them rapidly when they are not needed.
3. **Detailed explanation and idea elaboration** which you do not need.
4. **Broad, generalized ideas** and ideas which are restatements of previous ones. These can be readily grasped, even with scan techniques.

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