

Five Pointers on Improving Your Reading Rate

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If I had to name the most common misconception, or misunderstanding, about reading, it would be the idea that the right book, course, or machine will teach you how to “speed read.” Then, armed with this special skill, you can speed read your way through any and all texts, from novels to textbooks.

Although, thankfully, the popularity of speed reading courses has declined some, the myth lives on that speed readers can read difficult texts at a rate of 600-900 words per minute. While it’s true that you can read at that rate, it’s also true that you won’t understand much and you’ll remember even less. Full disclosure here: As a graduate student, I paid a large portion of my tuition teaching speed reading with special machines and canned lectures about phrase reading and eye movements. However, I quickly realized that improving your reading rate is not about your eyes—although if you are having vision problems, glasses are going to help—it’s about your brain and how you use it. So with that thought in mind, here are some pointers on how your eyes and your brain can work together to improve your reading rate.

1. **Make reading a regular habit.** Your brain tells your eyes where to go based on what the brain knows about language and how it works. So the more you read, the more language clues your brain has at its disposal to guide your eyes. Thus, it really pays to put aside a half-hour a day to read a few chapters in a novel or the pages of the newspaper. The subject matter can be anything that interests you as long as it’s expressed in words rather than pictures. What you are doing during these daily reading periods is storing up knowledge about the language so that your brain can look at a word or phrase and make predictions about what’s coming up next.
2. **Know the importance of reading flexibility.** Good readers are flexible readers. They move back and forth between three different rates.
Rate 1: If the material is difficult and they want to master it thoroughly, they slow down to around 100-200 words per minute. If the text is really difficult, they go through it practically word-for-word and reduce their reading rate even more.
Rate 2: Readers aiming for mastery but reading a text that is both somewhat familiar and easy to process, say the role of nutrition in health, might well read between 250-350 words per minute.
Rate 3: If their overall goal is general information or enjoyment, then flexible readers feel free to speed ahead at rates as high as 500-800 words per minute.
Rate 4: And readers on the lookout for one specific piece of information—this is called *scanning*—will whiz ahead at rates as high as 1000 words per minute until they find the key word or phrase they want.

In practical terms, if your textbook chapter opens with an anecdote, feel free to skim your way through it as long as you get the point of the story. But when the list of objectives follows, slow down to reading rate 2. Maintain that rate until you reach a tough passage which won't readily give up its meaning. At that point, you should move into and study the passage sentence by sentence, maybe even paraphrasing each. Speed up as soon as your comprehension feels more immediate and you don't finish a paragraph wondering what in the world the writer was trying to say.

- 3. Make your grasp of vocabulary automatic.** There are certain words you know automatically. In other words, you don't have to think about them. The meaning seems to be encapsulated in the word. Obvious examples would be words like dog, house, bridge. The meanings of other words, however, hover somewhat dimly just on the edge of memory. Yes, you know what the word temperate means when it describes climate. It means "warm." Or then again, does it mean "hot?" The context of the word suggests you are in the ballpark by associating it with warmth, but you are not quite sure just how warm it gets in a temperate climate. Then there are words like "exordium" (the beginning or introductory part of a speech), which few people know on sight and most of us would have to look up if we encountered it in an unfamiliar context.

The more words you can make automatically familiar (in reading theory, this is actually called automaticity), the more you can maintain a reading rate of between 250 and 400 words per minute. It's common sense. If you have to fumble for meanings, you are going to lose time and cover less verbal territory than you would if all the words were immediately familiar without your having to think about them.

- 4. Build knowledge frameworks.** Like knowing how words generally combine or fit together, possessing background knowledge about the topic of your text will improve your ability to read faster. As with words, having advance knowledge about a text allows your brain to make accurate predictions about where the thread of the writer's thought is going. Thus you don't have to spend a lot of time figuring out the relationships between sentences. Armed with advance knowledge, you can actually predict what kind of sentence is coming up next because you already know something about the chain of events, underlying causes and effects, likely sequence of ideas, terminology, etc.

Now after reading this particular pointer, you might be looking heavenward, thinking, "Oh sure, right now I'm reading about plate tectonics in Earth Science. How am I expected to have pre-existing knowledge about this topic?" Well, there was a time when your only option was to head to the library for reference books or your local high school to look at junior high books that might offer you a simpler version of the same material. But thankfully, times have changed. We now have the

Internet. Type in the words “plate tectonics” and you will come up with numerous sources. Look for one that is clearly introductory, perhaps from an online encyclopedia, and you can get a general idea of the theory so that when you go back to your textbook, the words will more readily make sense. Thus you might be able to maintain a rate of 150 words per minute rather than slowing down to 75 in your struggle to understand how continents were formed.

- 5. Do timed re-reading drills.** If all you want to know is the point of the anecdote opening your textbook chapter, then skimming to the end of the story is fine. However, there are readers who find it difficult to just let themselves go and read at high rates of speed. They just can't quite believe that they will get the general gist and that sometimes the gist is all that matters. If you are one of those people fearful of skimming, you might benefit from regular practice of a double-reading drill.

On the first reading of a magazine or newspaper article, you can read at a comfortable rate, making sure that you understand everything, including the details that flesh out the main idea. Just make sure you time yourself so that you know when you started and when you stopped. Then re-read the same material, only this time force yourself to read in half the time, making sure that your eyes skim across the page. To keep a check on the time, you can practice with a friend who times you or else buy a cheap oven timer that you can use for timed readings.

Re-reading drills will increase your verbal comfort level. That means you will be more confident about your ability to correctly predict how an author's train of thought will unfold based on your knowledge of and experience with language.