READING: Adjusting Speed

How Fast Can We Read?

Before you try to increase your reading speed it is important to know just what the speed limits are, what is possible and what is not. We have all heard the claims that some individuals can “read” five thousand, ten thousand, and twenty thousand words per minute. Such claims are misleading. Just as it is impossible for even the strongest runner to cover a mile in a minute, there are limitations that prevent us from reading at the rate of thousands of words per minute. If you understand these limitations, you will not be discouraged when you fail to read your history or economics book as fast you can turn the pages.

Eye Movements

When you read, your eyes move across the line of print from left to right in short jerky movements, making frequent pauses. During these pauses or fixations, you focus on the words and they make sense to you; you understand them. You get no meaning while the eye is moving. How fast you can read depends on how many fixations you make. Research tells us that the eye can focus clearly on about two words (ten spaces) for each fixation; it cannot focus on an entire page or even a paragraph.

One fixation requires approximately ¼ of second. At eight words per second, the approximate words per minute you could read would be five hundred to six hundred. But do we have to focus clearly on each word in order to read? No, you may be able to use your peripheral vision (what you can see out of the corners of your eyes). But again there are limits. If what you’re reading is easy, you may be able to get meaning from ten additional spaces on either side of the fixation point. If we assume that we still need ¼ of a second per fixation, we may now be able to read sixteen to twenty words per second, or nine hundred to one thousand words per minute.

The numbers cited above are at best only rough estimations, but they do suggest the impossibility of “reading” thousands of words per minute. It is impossible to see all the words at such speeds. At best you could skim at those rates, since when you skim you leave out large chunks of material. (When you skim you get the main idea from a key sentence or two (to be able to skip over entire paragraphs.))

How Slow Should We Read?

If there are limits to how fast we can read, there are also limits to how slowly we should read. By “reading too slowly” we don’t mean reading slowly in order to understand difficult material. Rather we mean reading slowly because of lack of energy or interest. Many of us read more slowly than necessary. We stroll through an assignment when we could understand it at a brisk walk.
Adjusting Your Reading Speed

There are a number of factors that can affect your reading rate. It may be necessary for you to make frequent adjustments (i.e. slow down or speed up) in your reading rate within a single reading task.

Reduce Speed Signals

1. Unfamiliar terms.
2. Difficult sentence or paragraph structure.
3. Detailed technical materials (especially those on which you have scant background).
5. Material on which you want detailed retention.
6. Material with a diagram, requiring constant shifting from text to diagram.
7. Difficult concepts.
8. Materials you wish to give careful consideration to.
9. Materials requiring you to visualize “time.”
10. Artistic writing that invites your lingering.

Increase Speed Signals

1. Simple material that you are already familiar with.
2. Examples and illustrations unnecessary for understanding.
3. Detailed explanations and elaborations you do not need.
4. Ideas that are restatements of previous ones.
5. Materials from which you want only the more important ideas and facts.

Adjusting Your Rate to Your Purpose

The purpose for reading is an important factor related to both rate and comprehension and involving both the nature of the material and the reader’s approach to the material. If you are reading a magazine article for enjoyment, your purpose is different from your reading a chapter in a history book to prepare for an exam. Your reading rate is determined by your purpose for reading.