

## Resource 11: Speed reading – from the *Mind Tools* website

*This Resource is taken from the Mind Tools website. See the Internet Links section for more information.*

### **Radically increasing your reading speed**

Speed Reading helps you to read and understand text more quickly. It is an essential skill in any environment where you have to master large volumes of information quickly, as is the norm in fast-moving professional environments.

#### The Key Insight

The most important trick about speed reading is to know what information you want from a document before you start reading it: if you only want an outline of the issue that the document discusses, then you can skim the document very quickly and extract only the essential facts. If you need to understand the real detail of the document, then you need to read it slowly enough to fully understand it.

You will get the greatest time savings from speed reading by learning to skim excessively detailed documents.

#### Technical Issues

Even when you know how to ignore irrelevant detail, there are other technical improvements you can make to your reading style which will increase your reading speed.

Most people learn to read the way young children read – either letter-by-letter, or word-by-word. For most adults, this is probably not the case – think about how your eye muscles are moving now. You will probably find that you are fixing your eyes on one block of words, then moving your eyes to the next block of words, and so on. You are reading blocks of words at a time, not individual words one-by-one. You may also notice that you do not always go from one block to the next: sometimes you may move back to a previous block if you are unsure about something.

A skilled reader will read many words in each block. He or she will only dwell on each block for an instant, and will then move on. Only rarely will the reader's eyes skip back to a previous block of words. This reduces the amount of work that the reader's eyes have to do. It also increases the volume of information that can be examined in a period of time.

A poor reader will become bogged down, spending a lot of time reading small blocks of words. He or she will skip back often, losing the flow and structure of the text and overall understanding of the subject. This irregular eye movement will make reading tiring. Poor readers tend to dislike reading, and may find it harder to concentrate and understand written information.

Speed reading aims to improve reading skills by:

- increasing the number of words read in each block
- reducing the length of time spent reading each block, and
- reducing the number of times your eyes skip back to a previous sentence.

These are explained [on the next page]:

*Increasing the number of words in each block:*

This needs a conscious effort. Try to expand the number of words that you read at a time. Practice will help you to read faster. You may also find that you can increase the number of words read by holding the text a little further from your eyes. The more words you can read in each block, the faster you will read!

*Reducing fixation time:*

The minimum length of time needed to read each block is probably only a quarter of a second. By pushing yourself to reduce the time you take, you will get better at picking up information quickly. Again, this is a matter of practice and confidence.

*Reducing skip-back:*

To reduce the number of times that your eyes skip back to a previous sentence, run a pointer along the line as you read. This could be a finger, or a pen or pencil. Your eyes will follow the tip of your pointer, smoothing the flow of your reading. The speed at which you read using this method will largely depend on the speed at which you move the pointer.

You will be able to increase your reading speed a certain amount on your own by applying speed reading techniques. What you don't get out of self-study is the use of specialist reading machines and the confidence gained from successful speed-reading – this is where a good one-day course can revolutionize your reading skills.

**Key points:**

By speed reading you can read information more quickly. You may also get a better understanding of it as you will hold more of it in short-term memory.

To improve the speed of your reading, read more words in each block and reduce the length of time spent reading each block. Use a pointer to smooth the way your eyes move and reduce skip-back.

## **Reading strategies - reading efficiently by reading intelligently**

Good reading strategies help you to read in a very efficient way. Using them, you aim to get the maximum benefit from your reading with the minimum effort. This section will show you how to use 6 different strategies to read intelligently.

### **Strategy 1: Knowing what you want to know**

The first thing to ask yourself is: Why you are reading the text? Are you reading with a purpose or just for pleasure? What do you want to know after reading it?

Once you know this, you can examine the text to see whether it is going to move you towards this goal. An easy way of doing this is to look at the introduction and the chapter headings. The introduction should let you know whom the book is targeted at, and what it seeks to achieve. Chapter headings will give you an overall view of the structure of the subject.

Ask yourself whether the book meets your needs. Ask yourself if it assumes too much or too little knowledge. If the book isn't ideal, would it be better to find a better one?

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## **Strategy 2: Knowing how deeply to study the material**

Where you only need the shallowest knowledge of the subject, you can skim material. Here you read only chapter headings, introductions and summaries.

If you need a moderate level of information on a subject, then you can scan the text. Here you read the chapter introductions and summaries in detail. You may then speed read the contents of the chapters, picking out and understanding key words and concepts. At this level of looking at the document it is worth paying attention to diagrams and graphs.

Only when you need detailed knowledge of a subject is it worth studying the text. Here it is best to skim the material first to get an overview of the subject. This gives you an understanding of its structure, into which you can fit the detail gained from a full reading of the material. SQ3R is a good technique for getting a deep understanding of a text.

## **Strategy 3: Active reading**

When you are reading a document in detail, it often helps if you highlight, underline and annotate it as you go on. This emphasizes information in your mind, and helps you to review important points later.

Doing this also helps to keep your mind focused on the material and stops it wandering. This is obviously only something to do if you own the document! If you find that active reading helps, then it may be worth photocopying information in more expensive texts. You can then read and mark the photocopies.

If you are worried about destroying the material, ask yourself how much your investment of time is worth. If the benefit you get by active reading reasonably exceeds the value of the book, then the book is disposable.

## **Strategy 4: How to study different sorts of material**

Different sorts of documents hold information in different places and in different ways. They have different depths and breadths of coverage. By understanding the layout of the material you are reading, you can extract useful information much more efficiently.

### *Reading magazines and newspapers:*

These tend to give a very fragmented coverage of an area. They will typically only concentrate on the most interesting and glamorous parts of a topic - this helps them to sell copies! They will often ignore less interesting information that may be essential to a full understanding of a subject. Typically areas of useful information are padded out with large amounts of irrelevant waffle or with advertising.

The most effective way of getting information from magazines is to scan the contents tables or indexes and turn directly to interesting articles. If you find an article useful, then cut it out and file it in a folder specifically covering that sort of information. In this way you will build up sets of related articles that may begin to explain the subject. Newspapers tend to be arranged in sections. If you read a paper often, you can learn quickly which sections are useful and which ones you can skip altogether.

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*Reading individual articles:*

Articles within newspapers and magazines tend to be in three main types:

- **News Articles:**  
Here the most important information is presented first, with information being less and less useful as the article progresses. News articles are designed to explain the key points first, and then flesh them out with detail.
- **Opinion Articles:**  
Opinion articles present a point of view. Here the most important information is contained in the introduction and the summary, with the middle of the article containing supporting arguments.
- **Feature Articles:**  
These are written to provide entertainment or background on a subject. Typically the most important information is in the body of the text.

If you know what you want from an article, and recognize its type, you can extract information from it quickly and efficiently.

**Strategy 5: Reading 'whole subject' documents**

When you are reading an important document, it is easy to accept the writer's structure of thought. This can mean that you may not notice that important information has been omitted or that irrelevant detail has been included. A good way of recognizing this is to compile your own table of contents before you open the document. You can then use this table of contents to read the document in the order that you want. You will be able to spot omissions quickly.

**Strategy 6: Using glossaries with technical documents**

If you are reading large amounts of difficult technical material, it may be useful to photocopy or compile a glossary. Keep this beside you as you read. It will probably also be useful to note down the key concepts in your own words, and refer to them when necessary.

Usually it is best to make notes as you go. The most effective way of doing this may be to use Concept Maps.