



MODULE INTENSIVE READING
(PBI 221)



MODULE SESION 12
SPEED READING

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What Is Speed Reading?

Speed reading is the process of rapidly recognizing and absorbing phrases or sentences on a page all at once, rather than identifying individual words.

The amount of information that we process seems to be growing by the day, whether it's emails, reports and websites at work, or social media, books and magazines at home. We likely feel pressure to get through this information more quickly, so that we can **"stay in the loop"** and make informed decisions.

Most people read at an average rate of 250 words per minute (wpm), though some are naturally quicker than others. But, the ability to speed read could mean that you double this rate. We'll now explore some of the skills that you can use to accelerate your reading.

Learning to read Faster

Many students tend to read everything at the same rate (speed). However, fluent readers adjust their reading speed according to the material that they are reading and their purpose for reading it.

There are three important reasons for learning to read faster:

1. You will get through required reading more efficiently.
2. You will enjoy your extensive reading books more and so you will read more.
3. You will improve your comprehension.

The first two advantages of reading faster are obvious. The connection between reading faster and better comprehension may not be so clear, but it is no less important. When you read slowly, you read one word at a time, like this:

What	really	happens	when	we	read?	Some		
people	think	we	read	one	word	at	a	time.
They	think	we	read	a	word,	understand	it	
and	then	move	on	to	the	next	word.	

Reading separate words this way makes it hard to understand what you read because you must remember each word as a separate piece of information. By the time you get to the end of a sentence you may have forgotten the beginning.

The following **five strategies** will help you improve your reading rate (speed), that is, the speed at which you read. This is not the same as the "speed reading" sometimes advertised—as in "Learn to read a novel in an hour!" The aim here is to increase your rate gradually, while at the same time building confidence and comprehension. You should also keep in mind that your goal is not to read everything at maximum speed. Instead, you want to achieve flexibility and the ability to speed up or slow down according to the text and your purpose for reading. Experts believe that a reading rate of less than 200-250 words per minute (WPM) almost certainly indicates word-by-word reading. Many students who have never worked on increasing their reading rate read at that rate. Others may already read at faster rates. Whatever your rate is now, experience has shown that students who regularly work on their reading rate can double it in one semester. Very often, this also leads to better academic performance.

Strategy 1: Check your reading habits

Certain habits can slow you down. Think about your own reading habits.

- a. Do you try to pronounce every word as you read? Pronunciation is not necessary for comprehension. In fact, if you try to say the words, even silently, you will probably understand less. The effort of trying to pronounce the words will interfere with your ability to comprehend.
- b. Do you usually move your lips while you read silently? Saying the words will prevent you from ever reading faster than about 200 WPM, the fastest speed at which English can be spoken.
- c. Do you follow the words you read with your finger or a pencil? Following the words with your finger will also slow you down. The eyes of a good reader do not move line by line through a text. Instead they tend to jump ahead for new information, or hack for confirmation of what was read. Your eyes should be free to follow your thoughts, not your finger!
- d. Do you translate into your native language as you read in English? Or do you often write translations of words in the English text? Translating into your native language takes time and prevents you from concentrating on the ideas. Furthermore, it interferes with your ability to think in English as you read.

Note: If you answered yes to any of the questions, try to change the habits that are slowing you down.

Strategy 2: Read meaningful phrases or "chunks"

Good readers in English "chunk" as they read. That is, they read meaningful groups of words, which are much easier to remember than a lot of separate words. Furthermore, when reading in chunks, they can form connections among the ideas in the text and with information or ideas they know. What is a meaningful phrase, or

chunk? Good readers in English is a meaningful phrase because it makes sense alone. English chunk as is not a meaningful phrase because it does not make sense alone. Readers generally divide up sentences in similar ways, though there may be some differences. Faster readers tend to make longer phrases so they can take in more text at a time.

For example:

Each chunk / should be a phrase / that makes sense / by itself. (slower readers)

Each chunk should be a phrase / that makes sense by itself. (faster readers)

Strategy 3: Skip over unknown words

Do not stop when you come to an unknown word. Skip over the word and continue reading. In some cases, knowing the meaning of the word will not be necessary for understanding the important ideas in the passage. In other cases, you may be able to get a general sense of the word from the context.

Strategy 4: Use your intensive reading book

Here are two ways to use your intensive reading book to improve your reading rate (speed).

Reading sprints

Slow reading is often a matter of habit. You read at a certain speed because your eyes are used to moving across the page at that speed. Reading sprints are an effective way to break that habit and force your eyes to move more quickly. Sprints will help you in the same way that running sprints help runners who want to increase

their speed. They may seem difficult and tiring at first, and you will probably feel that you are comprehending little of the text. But with practice, they will get easier and your comprehension will improve.

Read the instructions below all the way through before you start so you will be able to concentrate on your reading during the sprint. You will need a reliable clock or watch and your intensive reading book.

Instructions for reading sprints :

1. Mark with a pencil where you are now in your book. Make a note of your starting time in the margin and read for five minutes.
2. Write in the margin of your book the number of pages you have read.
3. Count ahead about the same number of pages as those you have just read, and mark the place. (For example, if you read two and a half pages, count ahead two and a half pages.)
4. Try to read those pages in only four minutes. If you do not succeed the first time, keep trying until you do, using new pages each time. You will need to force your eyes to move faster along the page, skipping over words or even whole lines of text. Do not worry about your comprehension at this point.
5. Count ahead the same number of pages again, and mark the place as you did before. Try to read that same number of pages in three minutes. If you do not succeed, try again with new pages.
6. Now, try to read the same number of pages in two minutes. Keep trying until you succeed. You may be able to grab just a few words from the text. This does not matter. The important thing is to make your eyes move quickly and understand something.

7. Mark your place in the book again. Make a note of the starting time and read for five minutes without forcing yourself to read fast.
8. Count the number of pages you read this time. Compare this with the number of pages you read the first time.

Note: Many students find that their unforced "normal" speed is faster after the sprints. Regular practice with reading sprints will help you increase your reading rate and become more comfortable reading at faster speeds. (If you feel that you did not understand fully what you read during the sprints, you can read those pages again afterward.)

Strategy 5: Practice with timed readings

Regular practice in reading against the clock is the best way to increase your reading rate. In the example below, you will time yourself as you read the passage and then answer comprehension questions. These are the same steps you will follow as you read all of the passages in Units 2, 3, and 4. (All of the passages are about 950 words long.)

Example:

A. Write your exact starting time. Preview the passage for a few seconds and then read it all the way through to the end. Push yourself to read a little faster than usual.

Using Cell Phones:

Starting time _____

Cultural Differences

(Write the exact time you begin reading.)

What do you do if your cell phone rings while you are with a group of people? If you are French, you will probably ignore the call. If you are English, you may walk away from the group to answer it. If you are Spanish, you are likely to answer it there in the middle of the group and invite everyone around you to join the conversation.

As many travelers have noticed, there are considerable differences from one country to another in the way people use their cell phones. This has been confirmed by a recent study of cell phone use in three European cities—Madrid, London, and Paris. In spite of the fact that these cities are all in the European Union and share a great deal of history and culture, local customs are still very different. These customs influence the way people in these cities use their phones in public.

According to Amparo Lasén, the Spanish sociologist who conducted the study, there were no real surprises for anyone who is familiar with the customs in these cities. Lasén interviewed people and observed their behavior in three different settings: a major train station, a commercial area, and a business district in each city. She found that Londoners use their cell phones the least in public. If they are with others, they prefer to let calls be answered by voice mail (a recorded message) and then they check for messages later. If the English do answer a call on the street, they seem to dislike talking with others around. They tend to move away from a crowded sidewalk and seek out a place where they cannot be heard, such as the far side of a subway entrance or even the edge of a street. They seem to feel that the danger of the traffic is preferable to the risk of having their conversation be overheard.

This has led to a behavior that Lasén has called "clustering." At a busy time of day on the streets of London, you may find small crowds of cell phone users grouped together, each one talking into a cell phone. Even when it is raining—as it often is in London—people still prefer not to hold their conversations where others could hear. They talk under their umbrellas or in a doorway.

In Madrid, on the other hand, few people use voice mail because the Spanish dislike talking with machines rather than real voices. If there is no answer, they don't leave a message. They prefer to try again later or wait for a return call. And since the Spanish are not shy about answering their calls in public, the call may come sooner than it would in London or Paris. In fact, in Madrid it is common to hear loud and lively phone conversations on the street, accompanied by shouts, laughter and the waving of hands. In fact, sometimes it happens that a group of friends may be walking down the street together, each talking on their own phone, but smiling and nodding as though it were one large conversation that everyone could hear.

Even when they are not using their phones, the Spanish often hold them in their hands as they walk down the street or put them on the table at a restaurant, so they will not miss any incoming calls. In a movie theater, not only do cell phones occasionally ring, but people sometimes answer them and have brief conversations.

In Paris, however, there are stricter rules about how and when to use cell phones. It is not considered polite to use a phone in a restaurant, for instance, though it might be acceptable in the more informal setting of a café. One special custom that has developed in cafés seems unique to Paris. Young women often place their cell phones on the table beside them to signal that they are expecting someone. When the friend arrives, the phone is put away. In fact, the French are generally very disapproving of phone use in public and are quick to express that disapproval, even to strangers.

In one area, sociologists found that the French and Spanish were similar. Both were quite willing to continue a phone conversation in a romantic situation, even kissing someone present while continuing a conversation on the phone. These people were clearly not using videophones. In London, however, no one was ever

observed to be kissing while on the telephone. The English seem to prefer more privacy for their romantic moments.

According to Laser, cultural stereotypes were supported by yet another difference that she noticed as she conducted her study. In each of the three cities, people reacted to her differently when she was interviewing and observing. In Paris, people frowned at her; in London, they pretended not to notice; in Madrid, however, they did not seem to mind.

Understanding the habits of these European cell phone users has become a lively topic of study for sociologists and psychologists at European universities. But with 1 billion cell phone users around the world, the subject is of interest not only to academic researchers. Habits of cell phone use are also a matter of serious study by telecommunications companies. If they can understand the local customs and customers better, they might be able to change people's behavior and increase cell phone use. For example, if phone companies want to increase their profits in France, they need to convince people that it is acceptable to use their phones in restaurants. The Spanish need to be persuaded that voice mail is not so bad, and the English must learn to leave their phones on all the time.

(Source: Adapted from "A Mobile Tale of Three Cities" by Thomas Crampton. International Herald Tribune, June 11-12, 2005)

Finishing time _____

(Write the exact time that you finish reading.)

Reading time _____

(Subtract your starting time from
your finishing time.)

B. Write your exact finishing time (minutes and seconds) and reading time. Then turn to the next page and answer the comprehension questions. Do not look back at the passage while you are answering the questions.

Strategy 6 : The Scanning (or Previewing) Method

"Scanning" involves moving your eyes quickly down the page – often down the center – and identifying specific words and phrases as you go. These can be key sentences (often the first sentence of each paragraph), names, numbers, or trigger words and ideas. Learning to expand your peripheral vision can help with this. You won't read every word, but your eye will land on what is important to allow you to grasp the basic idea.

When to Speed Read

These techniques can all help you to read more quickly, but are they appropriate for what you're trying to achieve?

Effective speed reading is a balance between pace and comprehension. **Studies** have found that the faster you read, the less information you take in, particularly when it comes to remembering detail.

So, speed reading is clearly not the answer if you're reading a complex legal or technical document, even if you are pushed for time. Similarly, it would be sensible to slow down if the material you're reading is new or unfamiliar, or if you have to teach it to someone else.

When you need to understand only the basic arguments or conclusions being presented, though, using a speed reading technique can work. This may especially be the case if you intend to go back and re-read something more slowly when you're

less busy. In fact, **one study** has suggested that skimming a text can improve your comprehension second time around.

Generally speaking, if you want to memorize something, you'll need to read slowly, at less than 100 wpm. A normal rate for learning is 100-200 wpm, and for comprehension it is 200-400 wpm.

Speed reading is normally done at a rate of around 400-700 wpm. Anything above 500-600 wpm means sacrificing comprehension, although this varies from person to person.

How to Improve Your Speed Reading

Knowing the "how" and "when" of speed reading is only the first step to success. Here are some more tips to help you:

- **Avoid distractions.** Create an environment where there are as few interruptions and distractions as possible, to allow you to focus fully on the words in front of you.
- **Go easy.** Read an uncomplicated novel or a simple online article to get a feel for which technique is going to work best for you. Gauge how much you've remembered or understood, and set a timer to see how much faster you are now reading.
- **Cover words that you've already read.** This helps you to stop your eyes flitting back to earlier words and slowing down your reading.
- **Know what you want from the text.** This can be useful if you are using the skimming method, as it primes you to pay attention when you see relevant words, sentences or phrases. You can then slow down at these points, or circle them for emphasis, but otherwise move across the page quickly.

- **Benchmark your progress.** This way you can tell whether your practice is paying off. There are many free speed reading assessments online, such as at ReadingSoft.com.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** You have to practice speed reading to get good at it. The more you train yourself, the more natural it will feel.

Key Points

There are different techniques that you can use to improve your reading speed. All of them involve skimming a page rather than "sub-vocalizing" each word as you were likely taught at school.

Excellent speed reading involves practice and retraining yourself, as well as learning to focus more on what is in front of you and avoiding distractions.

But it is important to strike the right balance between speed and comprehension: sometimes speed reading is not appropriate or helpful.



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