Wolfson Academic Skills

Speed Reading

As a student you will have to assimilate an enormous amount of research. Being an effective reader is therefore essential to maximizing the amount of time you have to digest and communicate those works in your own words. This guide will give you some tips as to how you might be able to speed up the rate at which you read.

It is important to note that the rate at which you read is not indicative of your academic ability or reflective of how well you will perform at the end of your degree. There are disciplinary differences and, regardless of your level of proficiency with a language, there will always be texts that are hard to read quickly. Deep reading is more important than doing the reading but speed reading can help you choose which texts require further attention.

More information on selection of material is in our Critical Reading guide.

What is reading?

Common definitions might include: understanding what the author intended, taking in the written word or the assimilation of information. But Tony Buzan (2010), a Speed Reading specialist, suggests it is a seven-stage process:

- Recognition—knowing the alphabet
- Assimilation—physical process by which image is reflected from the page to the brain
- Comprehension—linking the information you read to other appropriate parts of the text
- Understanding—linking what you read with all your previous knowledge of the subject
- Retention—storing the information in the brain
- Recall—getting information back from storage
- Communication—putting the information to use through speaking and writing.

Obstacles to reading

There are many reasons while we can find reading difficult and time-consuming:

- Language, including discipline-specific vocabulary
- Working environment
- Distractions
- Fatigue
- Specific Learning Disabilities
- Motivation
- Health

It isn’t possible to control all of these but change what you can: the placement of the book or screen in relation to your body and especially your eyes; which chair you are using and whether it is suitable for the height of desk; position the light opposite the shoulder from which you write; set objectives that will help clarify why you are reading something; select your most productive hours in the day; avoid interruptions; and make sure you take rests.
Techniques

**Pointer** - Use a thin pencil, knitting needle or chopstick. You need to be able to see round it and so don’t use a finger or hand as this will block your vision.

Sweep—with a very light and smooth motion, sweep from left to right, underlining the line with the tip of the pointer about an inch in and an inch out on each line. Use your whole arm to move, balancing on your arm muscle. Imagine that you are dusting off salt from the page. Don’t read backwards; just take across then lift on the return and put down again on the left. Build to a double line sweep. If you read piano music you may find this comes naturally.

Hop—lift your fingers and make two even bounces on each line. Each time you bounce, you are making a fixation which hopefully catches sets of three or four words. Moving to a hop method also makes it easier to keep a steady pace as it is a lot like tapping your fingers on a desk.

Zig zag—this is a modified scanning technique. Take your hand and cut across the text diagonally about three lines and then slide back to the next line. The idea is not necessarily to see each word, but to scan the entire area, letting your mind pick out the main ideas. This is not recommended for material that requires very careful reading, but it will help you glean general ideas from accessible material.

**Card** - Use a piece of paper or card about the width of your page.

Drag—Slowly move it straight down the page, drawing your eyes down as you read. Keep an even, slow motion. Your eyes may not be exactly where the card is, but this will help you go faster. Only do it once per page.

Cover-up—Use a card above the line of print to block the words after you read them. Draw it down the page slowly and steadily, trying to read the passage before you cover the words. This helps break you of the habit of reading a passage over and over again.

**Metronome**

Set to a steady speed and then increase gradually. Get used sweeping or hopping at this high speed. Then reduce it to what seems acceptable but is still faster than your average. This has the effect of making it seem a more natural pace.

Approaches to limit

- **Sub-vocalisation** - ‘speaking’ the words silently in your head.
- **Repetition or regressions** - frequent re-reading what you have already looked at.
- **Fixations** - the pause on an individual word.

Approaches to try

- **Chunking** - clumping words into meaningful groups and trying to read them together in a single ‘visual gulp’.

Online reading

- Pointers can work but are more problematic with tablets and are uncomfortable with vertical screens.
- Edit the font size, typeface or line spacing where possible. Smaller spacing lets you take on more through your peripheral vision.
- Improve lighting and minimise the glare from windows or lamps.
- Decrease screen brightness and use night-light settings to help you sleep.
- Ensure contrast between text and background.
- Take regular visual rests and look into the middle and far distance.
- Don’t be distracted by following up links too frequently; make a note for later.

Resources


