

LINE ON LIFE

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Speed Reading – Saving Time and Money *

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I assume that you are always interested in saving time and money. You can save time, if you can learn to read faster. College students read at an average rate of 250-300 words per minute. If you are reading at this level, you can push the upper limit of your speed of actual reading to 500-600 words per minute – and learn to skim material at even faster rates.

This article can help you save money by increasing your speed without taking a course that would cost hundreds of dollars. Many people have been taught to double their reading rate by using the procedures outlined in this article. To give you more confidence in the procedure, you first need to understand how it works.

Reading is not just a matter of images falling on your eyes. Your brain actively synthesizes the information on the page. Your brain reduces the amount of visual information you use by taking advantage of information from your memory. As far as language is concerned, there are at least three types of information you get from your memory.

1. **Orthographic** information covers how letters are combined into words.
2. **Syntactic** information covers how words are combined into sentences.
3. **Semantic** information relates to the meaning of the passage.

To illustrate these, suppose we see the following sentence except for the underlined positions – "*Poncho hit the _ _ll.*" What is the incomplete word? In the first underlined position, the vertical line indicates that the letter is a consonant. In the second position, there is no visual information.

In this situation, what we know about words – orthographic rules – gives us a great deal of information. Since three of the four letters are consonants, we know that the missing letter in the second position must be a vowel. Thus orthographic information reduces the possibilities from 26 – the total alphabet – to 6 vowels. From the construction of the sentence, we can conclude that the word is a noun. This eliminates such possibilities as "*fill*," "*full*," "*tall*," and "*tell*."

In this limited sample, the meaning of the sentence – semantic – gives little useful information. Poncho could have hit just about anything – a ball, bell, bull, bill or till. In richer context, semantics would help a great deal. For example, you will probably have no trouble reducing the choice to a single word in the following sentences.

To save his friend from being gored, Poncho hit the _ _ll with a well-aimed rock.

With bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth, Poncho hit the _ _ll out of the park.

These examples merely illustrate the three types of information that your brain uses when reading. All three sources of information may be used at the same time or in a different order than we have shown.

To activate your synthesizing processes to increase your reading speed, do the following exercise for 15 minutes each day for several months. Set a timer for 3 minutes and read at your normal speed from a section of a newspaper or magazine. When the timer sounds, stop reading and count the number of words you have read. Multiply this by 1.2 to get the number of words you should try to read in the next three-

minute period. The number of words will be 20% faster than you normally read. It may take extended practice to reach your goal, but force yourself to read faster until you accomplish it.

At first, the new speed level will be uncomfortable, until your synthesizing processes improve to meet the challenge. When you first speed up, you will not recognize all the words or understand everything you read. After your synthesizing processes are adjusted to use the information efficiently, you will be able to read faster with no loss of comprehension.

As soon as you become comfortable at the new speed, increase your speed by another 20%. Continue to increase your speed until you reach about 500 words per minute. I hope that many of you will enjoy your reading in about half the time that it is now taking you to do.

For some of us, it is hard to push ourselves toward this type of goal. We need someone to do the pushing. If this is true for you – and you want to improve your reading speed – there are people and programs available to help you. Although there will be a fee, it will be very inexpensive compared to the hundreds of dollars that some people pay for reading improvement courses. If you are interested, contact a counselor or reading instructor at your local university or community college. (The fees should be less at a community college than at a university or 4-year college.)

* Adapted from Worchel and Shebiliske's *Psychology: Principles and Applications*, Prentice-Hall, 1986, page 118.