

A LINE ON LIFE

3/8/98

Speed Reading Is Not Good for Studying *

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When students had lots of reading to do, many professors gave the same advice. "*Don't read every word. Scan it. Read Quickly. Ignore unimportant words. Focus on key concepts.*" Because of this, students view skimming as a study skill. Some take speed-reading lessons locally or online, off the World Wide Web. One method, the Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics course, claims to triple reading speed while still increasing comprehension.

Jumping from the average college reading rate of 300 words per minute (wpm) to 1,000 wpm can be accomplished. However, research indicates that you will absorb less of what is read.

Ronald Carver is an educational psychologist at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He indicates that speed-reading works best for people who are already *familiar* with the material being read. It helps if you are reviewing old material or checking material for changes. However, it is not effective for students who are trying to learn new information. Carver notes that it is not a good way to absorb unfamiliar material. By skimming their material, they skip words and miss important facts. If you skip words, you will understand less.

It doesn't allow readers to appreciate good poetry or literature either. (It is like gulping down a fine wine rather than savoring its taste.)

Carver did a study in the mid-1980s, comparing trained speed readers with naturally fluent readers. In both groups, comprehension deteriorated as their reading speed went higher than 600 wpm. In recalling details from a long book, naturally fluent readers were better than speed readers.

Carver uses the analogy of driving. For most people, the reading speed of 200-300 wpm is a comfortable "gear" that works for most textual terrains. When the material is more difficult, students need to "drop gears" to a slower reading speed. In contrast, skimming and speed reading are "overdrive gears" that can speed already knowledgeable readers to new information.

Prior knowledge is crucial for successful speed-reading. This is demonstrated by a 1996 study done by psychologist Walter Kintsch and his associates (Institute of Cognitive Science, University of Colorado). He used children 10-15 years of age. They read either highly detailed or cursory articles about heart disease and mammals' traits. Children with backgrounds in those areas learned more from the cursory texts. In contrast, those without background knowledge learned more from the detailed information.

***"Sure, speed-reading helps you to find the key concepts...
but if you really want to understand the material,
it's not a wise strategy."***

Skimming the material is a good first step in gaining information. However, after you have gained the major points by skimming, more detailed reading is required. Let's say you have been assigned to study a chapter in a text. First, skim the summary and the chapter to get an overview and the main points. Second, pick a small part of the chapter – a page or two, or from one section heading to another. Read it over the second time more carefully.

Next, find out how much the material you understood. To do this, close the text and write down the important points from that section on a sheet of scratch paper. After you have written all you can remember, open the text to check your accuracy. Most of you will be surprised at how much you have missed!

When we read our textbooks, most of us get lost in reveries about other things. We are not thinking about what we are reading. Our eyes cross the page, but our thoughts are elsewhere. For this reason, although we may have "*read the assignment*," we understand little about what it covered.

You can understand the reading more, if you continue the method mentioned previously. You have just read that section for the third time – finding out how much you have missed. Now close the text again, throw away the first sheet of scratch paper, and try to indicate what you have understood in writing. Check your efforts with the text again. If they are incomplete, close the text and again start writing the information you remember on a new sheet of paper.

Until you realize that you need to pay attention to what you are reading, it may take you 20 times before you can write down all the major points you have read. However, once you learn to concentrate on what you are reading, it will only take 4-5 times before you gain the desired knowledge from that section. Then you are ready to proceed to the next section.

If you think this sounds like a lot of hard work, you are right! If there was a shortcut to knowledge, I would have used it when I was in college. (Believe me, I tried to find one!) However, after decades of studying, I agree with Kintsch's view.

"If you want to understand something, there's no shortcut but hard work."

* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Speed-reading can undermine learning," [*The APA Monitor*](#), November, 1997, page 33.