Answers to Questions Commonly Asked About Reading Rate Improvement

Here are the answers to questions frequently asked by students interested in improving their reading rate.

1. **What does an efficient reading program include?**

   First, part of the work consists of doing exercises where you move your eyes over words at a rate faster than is possible for good comprehension. Second, you get some practice in reading materials for varying speeds to develop flexibility. Third, you have a chance to learn and try out techniques to improve your textbook reading.

2. **What good does it do to practice moving my eyes over words at a rate too fast to comprehend?**

   This is an exercise to improve your ability to “process” words quickly. Remember, the human body has a remarkable ability of adapting to new demands. For example, a person who loses the use of his/her sight or hearing soon begins to sharpen the other senses. He/she is simply utilizing potentials that were always there but never needed. Similarly, you have the potential to read words at a faster rate, but in order to develop the potential you must place demands on yourself. Doing these exercises accomplishes this goal.

3. **Is there any limit to how much I can increase my reading rate?**

   Research indicates that the physiological limits for seeing virtually every word is somewhere between 800 and 900 words per minute.

4. **Then can I read all materials, including textbooks, at that rate?**

   No, not with the same comprehension. Many variables have an effect on your reading rate for a given kind of material. The 800-900 w.p.m. rate is for easy material under the best possible conditions.

5. **What about people who claim they can read at 3,000 to 5,000 w.p.m.?**

   Generally, claims of being able to see and comprehend who sections of a page at a time have no been supported by research studies. If there are a few remarkably gifted readers who can do this, their existence does not change the fact that they, like rest of us, still have the limitations mentioned above.

6. **But some commercial programs claim to be able to teach anyone to read at thousands of words per minute. What about them?**

   Again, there is no evidence to support these claims. The fact is that most so-called speed readers are really just very good skimmers, able to get the gist of a passage by looking for main points. Skimming is a useful skill that almost anyone can develop, but it isn’t the same as reading.

7. **Is skimming useful for textbook study?**

   It depends. If the material is difficult or if you are reading for good comprehension and retention, you might skim to preview before reading more carefully. Skimming by itself probably would be used only when you are interested in very general comprehension, or when the materials are very easy or when you are caught short and must cover a lot of material the night before an exam.

8. **Can I expect my comprehension to improve as I increase my reading speed?**

   In some cases there is a small gain in comprehension. However, reading comprehension can best be improved by working on that special skill rather than on reading rate. Remember that reading is a complex set of skills that each of us can spend our whole life improving.
9. Why do I read slowly?

This very complex question does not, of course, have the same answer for every individual. First, keep in mind that some people underestimate their reading ability because they have unrealistic notions of how fast they should be able to read. The best way to find out about your reading performance is to talk to a reading counselor. If you do read below your potential, here are some questions to consider:

a. Do you mostly read difficult, textbook type material? If so, you may have gotten into a rut where you are so used to reading slowly that you read everything at the same time, plodding rate.

b. Are you generally a very careful person, not just in reading but in other areas of your life as well? If you are, it may mean that you read slowly because of your natural cautiousness.

c. When you first learned to read, was the importance of good comprehension drummed into you by your teachers? This emphasis often makes a person feel guilty about reading fast later in life. That is why a reading improvement program tends to stress speed rather than comprehension at first.

d. Do you enjoy reading? If reading is a chore, that may affect your rate. You might ask yourself why it is a chore.

All of these causes can be treated. Any person who reads slowly because of habit can improve his/her reading by systematically working on a ready program. A reading counselor can help you set up a program to suit your needs and goals.

10. What makes a good reader?

This is another complex question, but here are some traits that might be included. In general, a good reader....

a. enjoys reading, or at least does not find it to be a chore all the time.

b. is aware of his/her purpose when he/she reads and adjusts their reading rate accordingly.

c. does not feel that he/she must read every word- he/she is willing to risk missing something, especially when perfect comprehension is not required.

d. probably has fairly positive self-image (at least research studies have found a tendency in this direction).

e. has an adequate vocabulary which is constantly expanding through more reading.

f. has no problem with basic comprehension. That is, given a passage of average difficulty for his/her age level, he/she can understand what is being said after a single silent reading.