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HOW TO SPEED READ



GORDON WAINWRIGHT

howtobooks

When you want to know how...

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The Starting Point

Before you begin the process of improving your reading skills, you need to know where you are starting from. Reading performance is traditionally measured purely in terms of comprehension, but most people want to be able to deal with their daily reading faster and yet recall it effectively when required. Neither of these is assessed in school comprehension tests, yet good recall is essential for better comprehension. A prerequisite for achieving this is to find out what your reading speeds and recall levels are before you begin trying some new techniques. This chapter is therefore devoted to assessing the starting point for this programme of training.

READING SPEED AND POST-READING RECALL

Before you begin working through this book and before you succumb to the temptation to look ahead and see what is coming, you should measure your present reading speed and post-reading recall. It is important to measure the latter because, if recall is not good immediately after reading something, it is not likely to improve later. You will find two exercises in the following pages that will enable you to do this, together with instructions on precisely how to complete them.

You should tackle these exercises as soon as possible because if you are tempted to look ahead at the rest of this book, this may influence the way in which you approach them and prevent you from finding out how good your reading skills were before you picked this book up.

Your reading performance will be tested and recorded by working through two exercises, taking an average of your results and then marking these on the progress graphs on page 110. As you read these exercises, you should try to read them as

quickly as you feel you can and still take the information in. You want, after all, to see how quickly you can read before you try new techniques.

When you come to answering the questions of the recall tests, you should avoid guessing answers if you do not know them. If you guess the answers, you may be right and this will make you think your recall is better than it really is.

For the same reason, you should not try to 'spot' questions, that is, try as you read to memorise isolated bits of information on the off chance that they may be required. They may, of course, but if they are then all you have proved is that you are a good 'spotter'. You have not proved to yourself that you have taken in what you have read. You will be the only person who knows how well or how badly you are doing, so why try to delude yourself? You will be much better off in the long run if you are as honest with yourself as it is possible to be. That way you will know accurately whether or not you have improved and by how much.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME

This programme consists of five stages:

1. **Review of present performance** – finding out where your starting point is.
2. **Objective setting** – deciding what you wish to achieve by working through the programme.
3. **Methods** – exploring the various methods for bringing about improvement and finding which ones work best for you.
4. **Evaluation of improved performance** – finding out how much you have improved by the end of the programme.
5. **Ongoing** – learning what you will need to do to maintain your improvements and to continue your development as a more efficient reader.

THE FIRST STAGE

The procedure for the first stage of the process is as follows:

- ◆ You read each passage once only as quickly as you can take it in and time the

reading (for this you will need a stopwatch, watch with a timer or a watch with a second hand).

- ◆ You answer the recall test, remembering not to guess if you do not know the answer nor to try to work the answer out.
- ◆ You convert the reading time into words per minute (using the conversion table on pages 109–110), check the answers to the recall test against the answers on pages 111–113 and record both results on the progress graphs on page 110.

Make sure you have your timing device ready and a pen or pencil for recording your answers.

If you are using a stopwatch or watch with a timer, follow your handbook's instructions for timing an event. If you are using a watch with a second hand, make a note of the time in minutes and seconds when you start. This is easier if you wait until the second hand is pointing to 12. Make a note of the time when you finish and then subtract the starting time from the finishing time.

EXERCISE

Start timing and begin reading NOW.

One of Our Tankers is Missing

'You can't be serious,' Henry Clough told his assistant James Wright.

'It's true,' James affirmed.

'But a tanker. You can't lose a tanker. Not one with all the latest nautical technology at its disposal,' Henry protested.

'You wouldn't think so,' agreed James, 'but it's gone. Last reported in the Atlantic at 2330 last night. Since then, nothing. No reports. No Mayday. Nothing. We've contacted all vessels known to be in the area at the time and none of them has any record of seeing it or having it on radar after 2330.'

Henry looked thoughtful for a few moments.

'No storms, I suppose,' he ventured.

‘No, the weather was pretty good. A large swell and strongish winds, but nothing that would worry the *Lady Lavinia*. She was as you know one of our most advanced vessels. Only been in service for two years. Only been in port and checked over last month. It’s a complete mystery.’

‘We’d better tell the boss,’ concluded Henry.

They took the lift to the top floor and walked along the luxurious corridor to the managing director’s suite. Fortunately, he was free and they were ushered in straight away. They told their story to an increasingly incredulous Sebastian Shorofski.

There was a long silence when they had finished. Eventually, the big man spoke.

‘Treat this as suspicious and instigate a full search and rescue. It could just be that she has for some reason suffered a total and catastrophic loss of all systems and is drifting helplessly out there somewhere.’

Henry and James went back to Henry’s office and began the lengthy procedure of initiating and co-ordinating the search.

At Mr Shorofski’s request, the media were not informed. He decided it was best not to alarm families and friends of the crew unnecessarily. After all, the tanker could reappear just as mysteriously as it had disappeared.

The search continued for several days without success, but on the Friday of that week an RAF Nimrod thought it sighted what looked like a very large oil slick off the coast of Ireland. If the oil came ashore it would be a bigger environmental disaster than the *Exxon Valdez* off the coast of Alaska some years previously.

‘We really ought to issue some sort of statement,’ said Henry Clough anxiously. ‘No,’ said Shorofski firmly. ‘Not until the loss of the ship is confirmed. It may not be our oil.’

‘But the authorities will need time to organise mopping up operations,’ protested Clough. ‘If it emerges later that we knew about this slick, even if it isn’t ours, and didn’t tell anyone, we’ll be crucified in the media. We could even face criminal charges.’

Shorofski was adamant. ‘The RAF spotted it – or thought they did – let them tell people. There’s no reason at this stage for us to get involved. For goodness’

sake, we don't even know yet for definite that there is an oil slick. You panic too quickly, Henry.'

Henry Clough looked glumly out of the window. He knew from past experience that there was no arguing with Sebastian Shorofski once he had made up his mind. Nevertheless, he hardly slept that night and was not at all looking forward to going into work the next day, but he had to have another try with Shorofski.

(556 words)

Stop timing and make a note of the time and answer the following questions *without looking back at the passage*.

Questions

1. What was the name of Henry Clough's assistant?
2. At what time was the last report received from the tanker?
3. What was the name of the tanker.
4. For how long had the tanker been in service?
5. What was Sebastian Shorofski's position in the company?
6. What was his initial reaction to being told of the tanker's disappearance?
7. Off the coast of which country was the suspected oil slick sighted?
8. What was the weather like when the tanker disappeared?
9. When had the tanker last been in port?
10. On which day of the week did the RAF Nimrod think it had spotted an oil slick?

Convert the reading time into words per minute (using the conversion table on pages 109–110), check the answers to the recall test against the answers on pages 111–113 and record both results on the progress graphs on page 110.

You should, then, have finished up with a speed in words per minute and a recall score out of ten (converted into a percentage by placing 0 after your score, e.g. 7 out of 10=70%, there is a reason for doing this which will be explained in Chapter 5). Make sure you have recorded this on vertical line 1 or in the column to the left of line 1 on the comprehension graph, depending on whether you wish to build up a graph or a bar chart. Either method will produce a picture which develops as you proceed and will later enable you to see where you are, where you

have come from and where you might be likely to finish up. It thus provides you with both instant and cumulative feedback on your performance.

EXERCISE

Begin timing the second exercise and begin reading NOW.

If You're Going Back to San Francisco

We've all heard the publicist's claim, 'This is Everybody's Favourite City.' Well, it's certainly mine. I first went there about ten years ago, just before companies began seriously to look at the expense of sending their executives first class on long-haul journeys. I had been to America before, of course, but that was to Florida. This was very different. It was about twenty degrees cooler and the humidity in comparison was negligible.

What pleased me most, I think, apart from the skyline, was that it was a city you could walk about in and actually feel that in half an hour or so you were getting somewhere. We went to all the usual tourist spots – the Coit Tower, Lombard Street ('the crookedest street in the world' with its succession of hairpin bends), the Embarcadero and Fisherman's Wharf.

The Wharf was a delight, not for the crowds, but for the fact that Earthquake McGoon's was still open at the time and Turk Murphy's Jazz Band were playing. I even bought one of his cassettes and had him autograph it. I still play it when nostalgia overtakes me.

We had a car while we were there as we intended to visit companies in the surrounding area and on one free afternoon we drove across the Golden Gate Bridge, my favourite piece of architecture not least because it was opened in the year I was born. We drove up Highway One into Muir Woods and stopped at the Pelican Inn near Muir Beach. This is a passable imitation, certainly for America, of a sixteenth-century English inn. We had sausage and mash and a pint of Bass. By US standards, it was expensive, but when you've been away from home for a while you get homesick. After drinking their lager-like beers, it was a genuine refreshment to quaff proper beer. It was so good we had another.

The next time I went to San Francisco, I was left on my own for a few days as my colleague had to return early. This time I drove south down Highway One. I

followed the coast as far as Santa Cruz and then headed inland. I was looking for a small town we had held a meeting in on the first visit, Los Altos, not far from Palo Alto. I found it without much difficulty and strolled around its pleasantly warm streets, even though this was October, and found an incredibly good bookshop. It has always puzzled me that bookshops in America often have a far wider choice of books than even some of the better bookshops in British towns and cities. I found a quiet bar and had a beer. The atmosphere of US small towns can be so relaxing and it is surprising how much the pace of life slows down even when only a few miles away from a conurbation.

The last time I was in San Francisco was with my wife and we found it a disappointment. We were flying round the world to celebrate our silver wedding anniversary. This time the city was cold and damp and my wife yearned for the Hawaii and the Bali we had recently departed. It was to get even worse in New York and I think she was secretly pleased to get back home.

On the Wharf, Earthquake McGoon's was gone. I could not even find a sign anywhere of its existence. When we went to Alioto's for a fish dinner, the lady who served us came from a small town no more than ten miles away from where we live. It felt as if we weren't really abroad. It was like some years earlier on my first visit to Japan. We had finished business for the day in Kobe and were taken by one of the British officials to a bar for a drink before going out for dinner. There was only one other person in the bar at the time, a Geordie engineer. Again, I almost felt cheated. It was as if, so far away from home, no one else from your own country had the right to intrude.

I'd like to go back to San Francisco, but then again I'm not so sure. They do say that, in life, you should never go back. Things are never the same. They certainly weren't on the Wharf.

(725 words)

Stop timing and make a note of the time and answer the following questions *without looking back at the passage*.

Questions

1. How does the publicist's claim describe San Francisco?
2. Which state had the writer visited before his first visit to San Francisco?

3. What was the name of the jazz band that was playing at Earthquake McGoon's?
4. What was the name of the replica of a sixteenth-century English inn?
5. What was the brand of beer the writer drank there?
6. On which highway did the writer drive on both visits?
7. How far south did he drive on his second visit?
8. What was the name of the small town he visited on the second trip?
9. What did he find in this town that was incredibly good?
10. Who was the only other occupant of the bar in Kobe, Japan?

Convert the reading time into words per minute (using the conversion table on pages 109–110), check the answers to the recall test against the answers on pages 111–113 and record both results on the progress graphs on page 110.

Now average the two results for both speed and recall and make a note of them.

ASSESSMENT OF RESULTS

Typically, at this stage, reading speed averaged over the two exercises is somewhere between 150 words per minute (w.p.m.) and 250 w.p.m. An average recall score is about 50–70%. This may not seem very high, but I can assure you that in my experience these are average figures at this point.

There is no evidence of any correlation between reading speed and intelligence, age, education, occupation or anything else. Many highly intelligent people, for example, are very slow readers, especially if they have had large amounts of study reading to deal with. Nor is there much evidence of a correlation between recall and any of these factors. So, don't worry if your results are on the low side. This simply means there is more to be gained from the programme.

THE NEXT STEP

Now that you have some idea of where you are starting from, it is time to begin to work through the programme. What you will be doing is based on the simple fact that there are people who are quite naturally faster and more efficient readers than

others. Research over the years has identified many of the techniques they use. You will be given the opportunity to try them out and see which ones work best for you. The programme aims to achieve improvement in reading skills by:

- ◆ developing appropriate attitudes towards reading
- ◆ undertaking a programme of work designed to raise maximum speeds in reading
- ◆ developing systematic approaches to handling written materials.

You are now ready to move on to stage two of the programme which you should attempt whenever you feel ready. You may prefer to have a rest at this point and resume tomorrow. You will find stage two in Chapter 2 and you are now free to browse through the rest of this book should you wish. You should not look too closely at any of the exercises, though, as they will then not provide you with the right kind of test at the appropriate time.

FURTHER PRACTICE

You will find it helps a great deal if you carry out the following tasks before proceeding:

- ◆ Measure your reading speed on a variety of the kinds of materials you normally have to deal with. Do not try to do it too precisely as an estimate of the number of words read will suffice. You should still be able to calculate reading speed with reasonable accuracy. Two simple methods of estimating the number of words read are:
 - Count the number of words in 10 lines and divide by 10 to obtain an average per line. Multiply this by the number of lines on a typical page. Then multiply this by the number of pages read.
 - Measure off 1" (one inch) of text (a centimetre is not enough). Count the number of words. Multiply this by the length of the piece in column or page inches.

Test recall by noting down briefly what you remember from each piece.

- ◆ Make a list of the different kinds of materials you have to deal with together with an assessment of how important it is to retain information read for each one.
- ◆ Read at least one item purely for the pleasure of reading it (a chapter of a novel, an article of special interest or a chapter of a book on a subject of particular interest to you personally). You may, of course, read more than the specified amount if you wish. The more widely you read from now on, the better. It will not be a question of, 'Never mind the quality, feel the width', though. Variety is more important than mere quantity.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter you have learned:

- ◆ how to measure your reading speed
 - ◆ how to test your recall of information
 - ◆ the structure of the programme
 - ◆ your starting point for the programme
 - ◆ how to complete the first of the five stages of the programme.
-

HOW TO SPEED READ

GORDON WAINWRIGHT

In today's information-laden and time-constrained world we are required to digest an increasing amount of written and printed material. Most people, in their capacity as student, job seeker, employee or leisure reader, want to be able to deal with their daily reading faster and also recall it effectively.

This book gives you the means to do just that by:

- FINDING the techniques for improvement that work best for you
- PROVIDING methods for increasing retention and recall
- PROMOTING flexibility – the key to reading efficiently
- OFFERING techniques for developing skim-reading
- HIGHLIGHTING problem areas and suggesting ways of addressing them

The book contains exercises to facilitate your development and assesses your results throughout, ensuring that you come away reading faster and recalling more.

GORDON WAINWRIGHT, a human resources development consultant, is the author of twelve books on management communication skills.

'...will help you reduce the time spent on reading and recalling information.' Evening Standard

'Purely practical and aims to help you in the professional environment.' The Times

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