Learning on Steroids:

Getting Started with Speed Reading

by Scott Young

Speed reading is one of the best non-holistic techniques I've found for rapid learning. However, before I started speed reading, I had a lot of misconceptions about what speed reading could do and how it could be used.

Debunking Speed Reading

Speed reading, at least in my experience, isn't about speed. It's about control.

Unfortunately, this point confuses many people who think speed reading is about blurring through text with perfect comprehension. That's a fantasy.

Speed reading is like racecar driving. Sure, going fast is important, but if you just hit the accelerator, you'll lose steering,

crash into another car and send car parts flying over drunken NASCAR fans. Racing requires control, not just a strong driving foot.

Comprehension is related to speed. When you go faster, comprehension goes down. When you read more slowly, comprehension goes up. What speed reading should enable you to do is:

1. Be able to increase your comprehension at higher reading speeds.
2. Teach you when to slow down and when to speed up, so you get the most value from your reading time.

Unfortunately, the first point is often emphasized first, and cynics are quick to point out studies where magical speed readers fail to maintain comprehension at high reading rates.

(To which, I say: *of course!*)

However, I believe the second point is the real power of speed reading. By using a few tactics to control my speed, I was able to read at the rate that benefited me most for each reading task.

Tactics of Speed Reading

Once again, as a *Getting Started* implementation guide, speed reading is a diverse topic, so there is plenty of future room for expansion. My entire goal with this guide is help you move from zero speed reading experience to starting to practice the skill.

As a result, I'm going to focus on only two attributes of speed reading:

1. Using a pointer
2. Practice reading

There are entire books on speed reading, but frankly, these two ideas are more than enough to get you stated. Too many ideas and its easy to lose sight of the essentials and feel overwhelmed. Master the walk before the run.
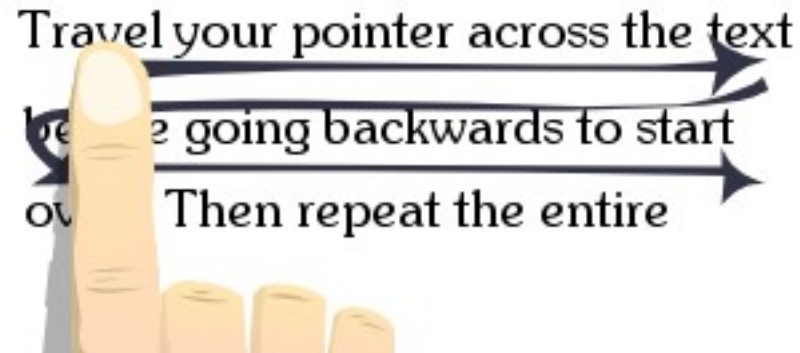
Using a Pointer

The idea behind a pointer is that, whenever possible, use your finger or pencil to underline the words you are reading, when you are reading them.

I typically only use this technique for books because it is cumbersome to use on a computer screen. However, you may want to use it exclusively when you first get started.

There are two advantages to reading with a pointer, the first for speed the second (and most crucial) for control.

Travel your pointer across the text ... going backwards to start ... Then repeat the entire

First, using a pointer increases your reading speed. No, not immediately. It takes getting used to (I didn't see increases in speed until over 2 weeks of practice).

A pointer increases your speed through improving **fixation**. Fixation is a problem when you read without a pointer because your eye is constantly making microtwitches away from its focus to gather new visual data. These movements are called **saccades** (a lack of saccades is what makes many human-like robots look creepy).

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When you have saccades (or are simply distracted from the page) your eyes must fixate themselves back on their original location. If you have a pointer, this fixation process takes less time because you won't lose your place.

Second, using a pointer increases your reading control. As I'll explain in the next section, with a pointer you can force yourself to read faster or slower. By moving your finger faster, your eyes have to keep up with reading. By moving your finger slower, you are forced to read more slowly.

This plays an important role in practice reading, but is still useful when reading regularly.

Practice Reading

Practice reading isn't actually reading. It's a form of exercise for your reading skills. Just like athletes do drills that aren't directly related to their sport, practice reading is such a drill for improving your reading ability.

When you practice read, you take a book you haven't read before and, with a pointer, force yourself to read it faster than you can comprehend. Not blazingly fast, but just slightly above your comfortable comprehension rate.

To get started with practice reading, first measure your current reading rate in words per minute. You can do this simply by:

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1. Recording your starting point.
2. Read for 5 minutes, uninterrupted.
3. Record your ending point.
4. Count the average words per line in your text.
5. Count the number of lines between your start and end point.
6. Multiply the average words by number of lines and divide by 5 minutes.

Your result will be the number of words, on average, you can read per minute.

In the book that taught me speed reading, <u>Breakthrough Rapid Reading</u>, it is suggested that you only work on practice reading if your speed is at least 200-250 words per minute. Less than this, and it's recommended that you focus on mastering your

use of the language and getting more comfortable with reading first.

So, when you practice read, do the same exercise as above, however your goal should be to increase your reading rate by 25-50%. So, if your current reading speed is 300 words per minute, you should practice at roughly 400 words per minute. This will train you to pick out meaning at higher speeds.

When you practice read, you can do two types of drills:

1. **Speed** - where the goal is to read as fast as possible.
2. **Comprehension** - where the goal is to record as many ideas, post-reading, while maintaining a predefined speed.

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After a month of practice reading, I was able to increase my original reading speed of 450 words per minute, up to 900 wpm with some texts.

However, as I mentioned in the introduction, the goal of speed reading isn't just increasing your top speed, it's to improve your handling.

Implementing Speed Reading

Speed reading is a big skill, so don't feel bad if you can't get it mastered in one month. Just aim at getting some basic comfort with the core concepts.

When I began speed reading, I aimed to spend 15 minutes practice reading, every day for 30 consecutive days. Like all 30 Day Trial methods, I advocate an approach like this for getting started with a new rapid learning skill.

Buy a few books of interest you haven't read yet. You'll use these when practice reading. Pick books that are similar to the books you want to speed read. This will help you adjust your practice to real situations.

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If your first recording of your words per minute is below 250, I'd suggest setting a different 30 Day Trial. Set a trial just to read (with or without a pointer) for a set amount of pages per day.

If English (or whatever you're reading) is your second language, or you simply haven't done much reading recently, your words per minute might be temporarily stunted. Once you feel comfortable at medium reading speeds, that's when you'll get the most benefit from practice reading.

So, if you've read this far, and want to make speed reading a part of your new rapid-learning life, *what are you waiting for?*

Talk is cheap, action is what matters.

Good luck to you, and I'll see you on the other side!