Speed Reading

This workshop will:

- Assess your current reading speed so you know where you are starting from
- Teach some preliminary techniques for improving reading speed
- Look at the role that concentration and environment play in effective reading and how these can be improved.

Teaching points:

1. How we read
2. Self-test your reading speed
3. Guided reading techniques
4. Skimming and scanning
5. ‘Beneficial’ reading problems
6. Improving your concentration
7. Solving environment issues

This booklet extensively adapts from Buzan (2006 a. and b.)
**How we read**

When we read, our eyes do not move smoothly across the text, but ‘jump’ from one ‘fixation point’ to another.

It is during these periods of fixation that we absorb information, ordinarily a word or two at a time. Speed reading techniques encourage us to limit the number of times our eyes fixate on each line of text, and discourage repeat reading, thereby increasing our overall reading speed. Research indicates that our eyes frequently do take in information that at the time of reading we may think we have not absorbed. So, there is less need for eye-fixation and re-reading.

Speed reading techniques are designed to discipline the natural reading motion of the eye.

However, it is important to recognise that there is no substitute for slow, careful, thoughtful reading of core academic texts. Intricate arguments and data need to be contemplated in detail. Speed reading can, though, be a useful means of getting through a range of wider material for which there would not otherwise be time. So it is important to be selective when applying speed reading techniques – you should ensure you have sufficient time to read essential course material carefully, and in some cases repeatedly, considering the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments and data being presented, whilst reading wider, more general material at speed.

**Self-test your reading speed**

**Activity 1:** Speed test

Read the following text for 1 minute and note with a pen or pencil the last word you read. Follow the other instructions when you have done this.
The Intelligence War – At the Front with Brain Training

New World Trends

Stock market analysts watch, like hawks, ten individuals in Silicon Valley. When there is even a hint one might move from Company A to Company B, the world’s stock markets shift.

The English Manpower Services Commission has published a survey in which it was noted that, of the top 10 per cent of companies no money or time was invested.

In Minnesota, the Plato Computer Education Project has already raised the thinking and academic performance levels of 200,000 pupils.

In the armed forces of an increasing number of countries, mental martial arts are becoming as important as physical combat skills.

National Olympic squads are devoting as much as 40 per cent of their training time to the development of positive mind set, mental stamina and visualisation.

In the Fortune 500 (the 500 top-earning US companies), the top five computer companies alone have spent over a billion dollars on educating their employees, and the development of intellectual capital has become the main priority, including the development of the world’s most powerful currency – the currency of intelligence.

In Caracas, Dr Luis Alberto Machado became the first person to be given a government portfolio as Minister of Intelligence, with a political mandate to increase the mental power of the nation.

We are witnessing a quantum leap in human evolution – the awareness by intelligence of itself, and the concomitant awareness that this intelligence can be nurtured to astounding advantage. This encouraging news must be considered in the context of the most significant problem areas as defined by the business community.

Over the last 20 years, over 100,000 people from each of the five major continents have been polled. The top 20 areas commonly mentioned as requiring improvement:

1. Reading speed
2. Reading comprehension
3. General study skills
4. Handling the information explosion
5. Memory
6. Concentration
7 Oral communication skills
8 Written communication skills
9 Creative thinking
10 Planning
11 Note-taking
12 Problem analysis
13 Problem solving
14 Motivation
15 Analytical thinking
16 Examination techniques
17 Prioritising
18 Time management
19 Assimilation of information
20 Getting started (procrastination)
21 Mental ability declining with age

With the aid of modern research on the functioning of the brain, each of these problems can be tackled with relative ease. This research covers:

1 The functions of the left and right cortex
2 Mind Mapping
3 Super-speed and range reading/intellectual commando units
4 Mnemonic techniques
5 Memory loss after learning
6 The brain cell
7 Mental abilities and ageing

**The Functions of the Left and Right Cortex**

It has now become common knowledge that the left and right cortical structures of the brain tend to deal with different intellectual functions. The left cortex primarily handles logic, words, numbers, sequence, analysis, linearity and listing, while the right cortex process rhythm, colour, imagination, day – dreaming, spatial relationships and dimension.

What has recently been realised is that the left cortex is not the ‘academic’ side, nor is the right cortex the ‘creative, intuitive, emotional’ side. We now know from columns of research that both sides need to be used in conjunction with each other for there to be both academic and creative success.

The Einsteins, Newtons, Cézannes and Mozarts of this world, like the great business geniuses, combined their linguistic, numerical and analytical skills with imagination and visualisation in order to produce their creative masterpieces.
Instructions:
a) Count the number of words on any three lines and add them together. (Take short lines into account).
b) Divide that number by three and you will have an average number of words per line. Make a note of this number.
c) Count the number of lines you read and make a note of this number.
d) Multiply the number of lines read by your average words per line and make a note of the number.

This is your reading speed in words per minute. This is the slowest it will ever be if you follow the information in the booklet and also do further reading in the sources found in the reference list.

**Guided reading techniques**

There is no magic potion that can speed up your reading – you need to try the techniques below to find out which works best for you and then practise.

Buzan suggests three guided reading zig-zag techniques based on the basic sweep method of...

- Slightly cup your right hand, keeping your fingers together
- Sweep your fingers across the page, from left to right, with a very light and smooth motion
- The tip of your tallest finger should sweep directly underneath each line (imagine that you are dusting salt from the page)
- Allow the motion of your hand to pull your eyes across and down the page

**Activity 2: The Sweep**

Practise The Sweep method on the lines of text below.
The three techniques are:

A. Double line sweep

This is identical to the original 'sweep' technique with the only difference being that you consistently take in two lines at a time.

Move your guide smoothly and gently along underneath two line, lifting the guide a fraction of a centimetre off the page on the return sweep, then moving it again smoothly underneath the two lines.

The double line sweep is an excellent way of getting your brain accustomed to using its vertical vision as well as its horizontal vision. It’s easier than you might think and many cultures use vertical as their primary vision, e.g. Japanese and Chinese cultures have favoured vertical over horizontal for thousands of years.

B. Variable sweep

Same as double line except you can take in as many lines as you feel you can at a time. Advanced speed readers usually take in between two and eight lines with each sweep.

C. Reverse sweep – ‘backward’ reading

This has the advantage of allowing you to instantaneously double your reading speed by using the backward sweep of your eyes to take in information rather than simply get you back to the beginning of the text.

‘Are you mad?’ I hear you say, ‘wouldn’t reading backwards give me a jumble of meaningless words in my head?’ Again, it’s easier than you think and other cultures have been doing it for centuries, e.g. Arabic and Israeli cultures.

The secret to reading backwards is that you are not reading backwards. If you take in five-six words per fixation, what you see in each fixation is in the correct order. So reading backwards is the same as reading the ‘usual’ way. This is because your brain processes chunks of words whether you are reading forwards or backwards. It still has to wait until it receives the last piece of information to be able to make sense of it all. The processing is the same – left to right or right to left.

The reverse sweep uses exactly the same hand motions as the other sweeps, simply reverse the technique.
Activity 2: Three techniques practice

Using the table of words, practise the three techniques.

**Skimming and scanning**

Skimming: is about you getting an overview of a piece of text without the details, finding out what its basic themes and concepts are, and identifying which parts you will use for reading in ‘depth’. This is used for preliminary reading. Amazingly, this can be done at speeds of over 1000 words per minute. Skim to get a general overview.
Academic Skills Advice

Scanning: you may not be aware of this but you scan daily: for a face in a crowd, on
the internet for news on a subject you are interested in, for a number on your
phone, and of course, when looking at academic text for specific information. You
will take brief summative notes, and this second reading will give you a better sense
of the text and its meaning. The key is to know what you are looking for before you
start. Scan to find something in particular.

For further support on reading, we run workshops on this subject. Please also refer
to the books in the reference list.

1. ‘Beneficial’ reading problems

Many people believe they have reading ‘problems’ such as ‘mouthing’ words as they
read; following their finger across a page when reading; or going back over words
already read. These are symptoms not of any inability to read effectively, but of a
lack of confidence, poor teaching methods, or a lack of understanding of how it is
the brain that reads not the eyes.

- ‘Mouthing’ words: there is an advantage to this issue as it can reinforce what
is being read, so as long as you don’t need it for understanding, it can work
for you. You can also try using your ‘inner voice’ which will allow you to turn
the volume up as high as you want allowing you to use it as a memory aid.

- Finger pointing: Eyes are designed to follow movement so this is a great way
to make your eyes more relaxed and efficient. Try using a slimmer reading
aid, maybe a pencil, so your finger does not obscure any words.

- Re-reading: This may either be a conscious or unconscious process. These
are down to a lack of confidence and a tendency to say in a ‘comfort zone’.
This is dangerous as you need to be able to read many different types of
texts for knowledge, understanding and using as evidence to support your
arguments in academic writing. Re-reading does not help understanding, so
try to speed up and relieve the pressure on your eyes.

2. Improving your concentration

Many students find it difficult to concentrate on their studies when alone caused by
the following:

- Conceptual difficulties: lacking understanding of the concepts you are reading
about will make concentrating harder. Try skimming (reading passages to get
an overview) and scanning (reading material to find specific detail) techniques. Additionally, ask your tutor for explanations.

- Inappropriate reading speed: the brain works best when reading at speed not ‘slowly and carefully’. Try this slowly:

  **Speed reading has been found to be better for understanding than slow reading**

Hard work, wasn’t it? Now read it quickly. Much easier. You will increase your comprehension of texts if you increase the speed of your reading.

- Distractions: There are always more interesting and enjoyable things to think about than your studies, even if it’s a topic you particularly like. Make it easier for yourself by turning off your phone, telling friends and family not to call or visit, making sure you have a drink to hand and that you have eaten, and any other preparations that will make it easier to study but would lead to not studying. If your mind starts to wander, think about what you want to achieve and possible make a brief list or Mind map or spidergram to gather your thoughts and remind you why you are studying.

- Poor organisation: Plan ahead so you have everything close to hand (as in ‘distractions’ above) and set yourself achievable targets. If you sit down with the intention of doing a full day of studying or revising, you are likely to feel burdened before you start. Break your day down into chunks (90 minutes-2 hours) with specific ideas of what you want to achieve in each chunk. You will feel more satisfied throughout and at the end of the day. Studying in chunks also allows you to plan for breaks. Your brain needs a rest, just like any other part of the body. Feed it, water it, and let it relax: 15 minutes should be fine. Your body will also need to relax and move as you are likely to be in one position for some time. You could try some light exercise or a short walk to get muscles moving. Improving your speed reading will help you achieve more per chunk.

- Lack of interest: This is often linked to other items on this list along with a lack of specialist vocabulary, conflicting priorities and negative attitude. You can do something about all of them, as you have discovered, but getting annoyed with the text is a great way to get drawn in, just as you would with other students who take an opposing view to yourself.

- Lack of motivation: basically, if you don’t know why you are studying, you are likely to have low drive for effort and success. Make new goals or review old
ones, familiarise yourself with your action plans or develop new plans; give yourself a reason to study and succeed. Using speed reading will help you achieve these goals all the quicker.

- Difficulties with vocabulary: constantly looking up words for their meaning whilst you read slows down your understanding of the text. Instead, underline the words you are unsure of, and continue reading. This method will help you understand the context of the word within the text, and you can find definitions to all the words in one go. You can then create your own glossary. Increasing your vocabulary will improve your speed reading capabilities. We will look at two easy ways to increase your vocabulary:

  - **Prefixes** are letters, or words placed at the beginning of a word to alter its meaning. If you can remember and use the following prefixes, you can instantly increase your vocabulary by **thousands** of words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Word meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Preordain</td>
<td>To order beforehand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-</td>
<td>Away, down</td>
<td>Descend</td>
<td>Move downwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-</td>
<td>Between, among</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Between nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ob-</td>
<td>Against</td>
<td>Obliterate</td>
<td>To delete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-</td>
<td>Into</td>
<td>Indent</td>
<td>Set in from the margin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mono-</td>
<td>Alone, one</td>
<td>Monograph</td>
<td>Text on one subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epi-</td>
<td>Upon</td>
<td>Epidermis</td>
<td>Top layer on top of other layer of skin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Activity 3:** Prefixes

In pairs or small groups, fill in the gaps.
### Prefixes

<table>
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<td>Pro-</td>
<td>Forward, for</td>
<td>Prognosis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not</td>
<td>Indecisive</td>
<td>Not able to make a decision</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Misunderstand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trans-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Across, beyond</td>
<td>Across continents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Suffixes

- **Suffixes** are letters, or words placed at the end of a word to alter its meaning. Often they are used to change one part of speech to another (e.g., adjectives to verbs) or are concerned with the characteristics or qualities of something.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Word meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-able</td>
<td>Capable of or</td>
<td>Durable</td>
<td>Long lasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ible</td>
<td>Fit for</td>
<td>Comprehensible</td>
<td>Can be understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-al</td>
<td>Relating to</td>
<td>Abdominal</td>
<td>Like or of the stomach area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ail</td>
<td>quality or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>action of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>forming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>Arrangement of protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Corpulence</td>
<td>against risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Becoming fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ant</td>
<td>Adjectives of</td>
<td>Defiant,</td>
<td>Defying something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>quality, nouns</td>
<td>Servant</td>
<td>Serving something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>signifying a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>personal agent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or something</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>producing an</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ation</td>
<td>Action or state</td>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>The state of something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ition</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dilapidation</td>
<td>In a poor structural state</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Activity 4: Suffixes

In pairs or small groups, fill in the gaps.
### 3. Solving environmental issues

Your state of being can affect your ability to study and to speed read. If you are unwell or feeling negative or your study space is in disarray, it is likely you will not study to the best of your ability, but if you are content, organised and positive, you are more likely to read well and comprehend information better. There are a number of steps you can take to create an environment conducive to study:

- **Light:** if you can, study in natural light as it releases more ‘good guy’ hormones. If this is not possible, artificial light should come over your shoulder, opposite to the hand you write with. The light should aid you to see more clearly but brighter than the other light in the room. If using an electronic device, place the screen facing towards the light.

- **Study materials:** as already discussed, have all these of these ready and to hand before you start your study.

- **Chair and desk:** Your chair should have a straight back and be neither too soft (or you will get comfortable, relax and sleepy) nor too hard (or you will fidget because of discomfort). Your knees should not be higher than your hips, and
preferably slightly higher so your back can take all the strain of your upper body. Your desk should be approximately 20cm (8 inches in old money) above the seat of the chair. Another tip is to learn basic touch typing. This will enable you to keep your back straight whilst typing rather than crouching over the keyboard whilst you look for each letter to hit with either of your forefingers.

✓ Posture: Your feet should be flat on the floor, back upright whilst maintaining the slight curve in your back to provide support. Hold your book or text or resting it on something so it is slightly upright. You may think these guidelines are not for you but they help your brain get the maximum flow of blood and oxygen so it works well; if your body is alert, your brain will be too; and your eyes can use both central and peripheral vision properly.

✓ When to study: If you are up with the dawn lark or become alert like a night-owl, study as appropriate. If you aren’t sure, try different times out to see how you perform.

✓ Interruptions: As discussed, reduce distractions including turning off your computer if you aren’t using it.

References


Answers

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<td>To, toward</td>
<td>Advocate</td>
<td>To speak for something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un-</td>
<td>Not together</td>
<td>Unconnected</td>
<td>Not linked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Com-</td>
<td>With</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>With others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-</td>
<td>Not</td>
<td>Non-entity</td>
<td>Thing of no importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-</td>
<td>Out, beyond</td>
<td>Extend</td>
<td>Stretch out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-</td>
<td>Back, again</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Go back</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Activity 3: Prefixes

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<td><strong>Forecast of the course of a disease</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans-</td>
<td>Across, beyond</td>
<td>Transcontinental</td>
<td>Across continents</td>
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</table>

### Activity 4: Suffixes

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Word meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-er</td>
<td>Belonging to</td>
<td>Farmer, New Yorker</td>
<td>One who works on a farm, One who comes from New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ism</td>
<td>Quality or doctrine</td>
<td>Realism, <strong>Socialism</strong></td>
<td>Tendency to view things as they are, System of community control of production and distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ive</td>
<td>Nature of</td>
<td>Creative, <strong>Receptive</strong></td>
<td>Having the quality of creating, Having the quality of receiving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ise -ize</td>
<td>Make, practise, act like</td>
<td>Modernize, Advertise</td>
<td>Give a new modern character to, To give information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-logy</td>
<td>Study of</td>
<td><strong>Biology</strong></td>
<td>Study of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ly</td>
<td>Having the quality of</td>
<td>Softly, <strong>Quickly</strong></td>
<td>To touch with gentleness, To move with speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-or</td>
<td>A state or action, a person who, or thing which</td>
<td>Victor, Generator</td>
<td>One who wins, One who generates something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ouse -ose</td>
<td>Full of</td>
<td>Murderous, <strong>Anxious</strong> Morose</td>
<td>Dealing only with murder, Full of anxiety, <strong>Full of gloom</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-some</td>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Gladsome</td>
<td>** Appearing happy**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-y</td>
<td>Condition</td>
<td><strong>Difficulty</strong></td>
<td>Something that is difficult</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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