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A whizz with words

Learn the secrets of speed reading and rattle through your books at a much smarter pace, says Tony Buzan

Tony Buzan

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Imagine you are reading a book, and you want to understand it as well as you can. Would you try to read slowly and thoroughly? Would you read it “word for word”? If you miss something, would you skip back and make sure you understand it before moving on? Would you avoid “saying” words under your breath as you read, thinking it sounds too childlike?

Most people answer “Yes” to these questions – but the smart answer to each one should be “No.” In fact, by reversing your negative

answer to the questions above, you can bring about an increase in your reading speed – and your speed of comprehension.



Need for speed: with a bit of smart practice, every one of your books will become a real page-turner

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By way of background, when I was 13, my class was given a speed-reading test by our teacher. Knowing nothing about speed reading, I was initially proud when I discovered my reading speed was 213 words per minute. It sounded a lot. But the girl next to me had a score of 314wpm – putting my score in perspective.

I told the teacher I wanted to improve my reading speed, but was told I could not – that you were, more or less, born with your reading speed, and it stayed with you for life.

But I couldn't see why I shouldn't improve. So, I worked on it and found, in a short time, that I could read at 400wpm – raising my comprehension rate as I raised my speed.

The art and science of speed reading is a young one, and we are still making discoveries about the capacity of our eyes. But with humans producing ever more information, learning to speed read is becoming a smart move – in both home and work life. The following tips will launch you on a speed-reading journey that will benefit all aspects of your life:

For better comprehension, you should not read slowly and carefully. If... you... read... any... book... one... word... at... a... time... your brain loses the plot. But speed up, and the words flow in at a far more brain-friendly rate, and you will have entered a positive spiral: more speed equals more comprehension.

Practise “sub-vocalisation” – sounding words “beneath your breath” as you read – is another smart thing to do. Your brain, where it is seeing words, will naturally echo the sounds of the words. As your brain is able to understand the spoken word at up to 2,000wpm, there is no way that sub-vocalisation is going to slow you down.

Use sub-vocalisation to your advantage at home by giving more “volume” in your imagination to the key words and ideas in the text you are reading.

Page-by-page reading is a disaster! When reading any book, you should first decide on the purpose for you reading. Then preview the whole book, much as you would when scanning in a bookshop or library to decide if you want to buy it. This gives your brain the “whole picture”, and will allow you to navigate the material more easily.

Next, check your current knowledge of the material. This gives your brain more “hooks” with which to “latch on” to any new information in your reading.

Only then should you read the material – in a relaxed but energetic way. As you read, note only key words and concepts – long “sentency” notes are not what your brain needs. If you have difficulty understanding something in the text, “put it aside” as you would with a difficult piece in a jigsaw puzzle. As you build more comprehension around that area, the difficult piece will fit again more easily. So, skipping unnecessary, minor, or familiar words, is a smart habit, and to be encouraged.

You now have a basic “starter's kit” to help you on your way to a lifetime of more rapid, more comprehended, more remembered, more enjoyable reading.

• Tony Buzan is author of *The Speed Reading Book* and an expert on speed reading, the brain, learning and memory. See www.buzanworld.com.

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