

## Becoming More Efficient In Reading Habits

Most people are inefficient readers. Some read too slowly, with a lack of understanding, others so fast that their minds are given no chance to take a firm grasp of the material. Reading efficiency must be measured by thoroughness and benefit derived rather than by quantity.

To improve your reading efficiency, attention must be given to four main points: selection of books; understanding what you read; note-making; and development of speed.

1. ***The selection of books.*** A wise selection of books carefully read will help to widen your interest, to develop your intelligence and to improve your education. Write down in a notebook the details of any book you hear of that seems worth reading. You will gather titles from the recommendation of friends, from newspaper and glossy magazine reviews and so on. Add a brief note of the reason for putting each title in your list. This list will grow more rapidly than you can read the books in it. Periodically go through it and cross out those in which your interest is no longer strong. This will keep the list up-to-date and alive.

Libraries are useful, but it is more satisfying to own your own copies of good books. They are always at hand for re-reading and reference. Try to buy at least one book a month, choosing carefully from your list.

Your reading list will naturally be guided by your purpose. Some entries may be novels for leisure hours. Others will deal with your hobby. A big section may contain titles to help with your studies. The list should enable you to choose easily something worth reading and to cut out the casual selection of a paperback on the strength of its gaudy cover.

2. ***Understanding What You Read:*** This may seem obvious, but few people manage to grasp clearly what is put before them. The main causes of difficulty are four:
  - (a) *Inadequate vocabulary:* to meet this trouble write down the words you do not fully understand, look them up in a dictionary and write down their meanings. Use the new words learnt in your own speech or writing as soon as possible.
  - (b) *Lack of reasoning power:* It is often necessary to follow an argument developed by the author. The faculty for grasping a process of reasoning can be developed only by using it. That is to say, start reasoning yourself. Question everything that comes your way. Exercise your talent for criticism. Read even the simplest newspaper article as though you were an examiner marking a candidate's paper. Of course, some books are more easily criticized than others. Nevertheless the attempt will greatly increase your understanding and respect for that work. Always read with your critical sense on the alert.
  - (c) *Insufficient background:* Many books assume that the reader already has some knowledge of the subject. If you are just taking up radio construction for a hobby, you will not immediately derive any benefit from a book on advanced circuits. This is a question of right selection of books, but as your knowledge and exercise grow you will understand a wider range of books, and get a deeper insight into the significance of simpler ones.
  - (d) *Read for correction, not for information:* In other words, think first and read afterwards. Suppose you want to study a new subject. First spend some time thinking what you already know or believe or would expect to be true of the subject. Then read a book,

and you will find it far more interesting and instructive than it would otherwise be. Another cause of slow reading is moving the lips to form words as you read. Regular practice in the deliberate effort to keep the lips still is needed. This fault will reduce your reading speed to that of your talking speed.

Avoid the bad habit of going back over material you have already read. If you have difficulty in finding the beginning of each line of print, there may be some fault in your vision and you should consult the doctor. Your posture may affect the speed. Sit upright, holding the book at right angles to your eyes. Compare the speed you manage this way with what you can accomplish with the book stuck sideways when you read in bed.

Do not expect to read everything at the same speed. Light novels can be read much more quickly than solid textbooks. You should have three or four reading speeds, each applicable to a particular kind of book. Your aim should be to improve each speed, not to scamper through everything at your fastest. A light novel of 240 pages should take you three to four hours to read. A psychology textbook of the same length should take ten to twelve hours, spread out over several sessions. After that period of time you should be able to give a comprehensive and accurate account of the contents.

Good readers usually read faster and understand more than poor readers. The aim should be to read fast enough to keep pushing the speed, yet not so fast that we lose the thought of what we are reading. The aim of reading is to learn something, or to entertain yourself, so the golden rule is never to read faster than your understanding allows, no matter how slowly you have to go. And always remember that some writers lack the gift of lucid expression, so that a slow speed may sometimes be the fault of the author.

Books contain the accumulated thought and experience of the wisest and cleverest. They are the substitute for conversation with the great, and in reading a man's thoughts we should behave towards them with the same respect that we should show to the man himself. For it gives the answer to problems that have already arisen in your mind. It corrects the mistaken ideas that you held. Thinking in advance gives the book a new relevance, relating it at once to your existing knowledge and beliefs.

3. **Note Taking.** The great value of owning books is that you are free to make pencil marks in them. In a book you have borrowed this is bad manners, but in your own it is commonsense. The marked passages indicate quickly the points of special interest to you. As you read, put a light line against these parts. Jot down the page number inside the front cover to help you turn rapidly to the marked passage. Skill in marking books is developed with practice. The object is to bring out the salient points. Often the first sentence in a paragraph is the important one, the rest being an amplification of it. Sometimes, however, the last sentence bears the main weight of the argument.

When a writer is describing the main points in his topic, it is helpful to number them in the margin as they are mentioned. If the author has himself used the words "first", "secondly" and so on, underline them to make them more prominent. The aim in marking your book should be to bring out the heart of the material. The effort of doing so will in itself make you concentrate more and so lead to better understanding. Record in a notebook your impressions of the books you read. Copy out passages, which particularly strike you, add your own comments and criticisms, write down any ideas for further reading or difficulties that the book has thrown up.

This exercise adds interest to your reading and the notes are useful when you come to read the book again later.

Making good notes about books is an art. The problem is to foresee what will be useful to you later on, when the book is less fresh in your memory. When it is read for pleasure record how much you enjoyed it, what parts you like best-in fact, your own re-actions. But if the book has to be mastered for an examination, this method will not do. The most through way is to write a summary of every paragraph, so making a condensed version of the book.

This impresses the material on your memory and just before the examination you can read through your notes, referring here and there to the original for points of especial importance or difficulty.

4. ***Developing a good speed.*** Many people would like to be able to read more quickly. Speed without understanding, however, is clearly valueless. Tests have shown that the best way to increase your reading speed is to improve your vocabulary and your powers of comprehension. If attention is given to improving speed alone, your understanding of what you read will suffer. Your memory will not retain the subject matter, nor will you give adequate thought to it. Many people read too quickly, and you may find it a good plan to slow down, especially if you read a good deal. Continual, indiscriminate and rapid reading quickly destroys the power to think and form sound judgments. Such reading, whether of light books or more serious ones, is just a drug to lull your mind.

Fast reading may degenerate into passive reading. The ideas, images and information the words are intended to convey flow into the passive mind like treacle into delicate machine. The critical faculty is suspended. Slow down, let your mind work on the words before it, read less and gain more from it. Nevertheless, it is desirable to achieve a good speed without sacrificing understanding.

Give attention to vocabulary and comprehension, and a few simple exercises, will help. Try holding a sheet of paper across the page covering all below the line you are reading. Move it down the page and try to keep up with it, gradually increasing the speed. As soon as you find you are no longer fully grasping the content, slow down again. Avoid reading word by word. Try instead to take in whole phrases. If the line of print is suddenly covered, you should still be able to say in your mind the remaining words in the line, your eye having taken them in, in advance.