

Tricks of the Trade: Speed Reading

In the third instalment of our Tricks of the Trade series, Clive Lewis, MD of Illumine, highlights why speed reading is so valuable in business.



Why do we need to speed read? Aren't we under enough pressure at work already?

If this is your premise then think again. Speed reading is not about forcing you to work harder. On the contrary, by enabling you

to triple your reading speed, it is much more about helping you to handle your time and your workload efficiently - and in this article I'm going to address some of the key questions that surround this approach.

Information Overload

The most common reason that people want to learn how to speed read is because of information overload. Today's corporate executives are having to take in, absorb and recall more information than ever and, of course, most of this data arrives in written form – through minutes, reports, proposals, brochures and, of course, texts and emails.

However, speed reading should not be seen as a reactive technology. Many participants on our courses report that one of the main drivers for them is to be able to find a way to read those books that have been sitting on their shelf for too long or those magazines that come every week and which they never seem to have time to open. These managers and executives recognise that knowledge is the fuel of career success and in this respect speed-reading is a step forward in efficiency, providing people with a real edge in a competitive world.

The Mechanics

The essential mechanics of speed reading are these. When asked, most people assume that they read in a smooth left to right motion across the page. However our eye movement when we read is not smooth at all. Our eyes have to stop at regular intervals in order for us to take in new data and this means that we actually take a series of small jumps as we read across the page. These jumps are known as fixations.

Fixations are the key determinant of our reading speed. If you take a long fixation, reading each line word by word, you will be a slow reader. And if you skip back over words or re-read whole paragraphs, as most people do, this will handicap you further. The skills therefore are these - to spend less time on each fixation and to learn to take in more words with each fixation.

Distinctions

There are two quite separate aspects of speed reading that are helpful to distinguish and they are these:

1. **Reading better:** Speed reading is not only about improving reading speed. It also includes a number of techniques which help you to read more efficiently and adapt your approach to what you are reading. For example if you have a large report to read then to start with you will probably need an overview. In this case one good technique is to power browse - as follows:
 - Look briefly at the cover of your document and see what it tells you about the subject
 - Look at the table of contents to understand the flow of the document.

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- Run through the document briefly – one or two seconds per page should do. Make a note of how it is put together and what parts interest you.
- Highlight those parts that you want to explore in more detail.
- Finally do a quick review and Mind Map what you have just browsed.

2. Reading faster: The second aspect of this approach is improving your reading speed and here again there are a number of techniques to learn. However one extremely useful example is to use a guide such as a pencil, a cursor or even your finger to underline the words as you read. Your guide in this context is your pace-setter and keeps your eyes moving along the line smoothly. On its own people find that this one technique can sometimes double their reading speed because it simply helps them to improve their focus.

Beliefs and Attitudes

So reading speed is all to do with the way our eyes take in information - is that right? Not wholly. When it comes to speed reading our challenges stem as much from our beliefs as from our physiology. For example, do you believe that you can read more than one word at a time, maintain comprehension when you are reading faster and recall more of what you have read when you are reading faster?

These benefits are all within reach, if you practise. And this is the real issue. We all have bad habits. For example most people back-track every now and again to make sure they have understood what they have just read even though research shows that it makes little or no difference to comprehension. We need to challenge such long established patterns, be willing to try out new techniques and be motivated to practice. However, changing our behaviour is not just a question of willpower. We need to create a positive attitude towards our subject. If we are in a negative frame of mind we will find that we absorb very little of what is in front of us. But if we can engage with interest, enthusiasm and creativity then we can, quite literally transform our effectiveness as readers.

So should you be learning how to speed read? Is it worth your time? If you are among the 90% of people who feel that they are suffering from information overload the real question to ask is 'can you afford not to?'

Illumine is Tony Buzan's preferred partner in corporate and public sector training.
For more details go to www.illumine.co.uk or call 01753 866633.