



# READ MORE BOOKS NOW

## Lesson #7

# Forget About Speed Reading

Woody Allen once summed up the problem with speed reading. He said, “I took a speed reading course and read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.”

Speed reading seems enticing at first. I mean, we all want to read more books, so we think we must increase one of two variables: we must either find more *time* to read or increase our *reading rate*. The first path is obvious. The more time we read, the more books we’ll read. Simple. It’s the second option that leads to problems, though.

Scientist Keith Rayner surveyed over twenty years of psychological research on reading and concluded, “You can practice [reading] faster and you probably will, but when you start going too fast you’ll start losing comprehension. Most speed reading methods involve getting rid of subvocalization. Research shows that when you do that and the text is difficult, comprehension goes to pieces.”

In other words, the faster you read, the less you understand and remember. You can read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes and only remember that it involved Russia.

Worse, the less you understand and remember about a book, the less you’ll be inspired to read other books. So, it’s a ruthless cycle. Speed reading just doesn’t work in the end.



So, then outside of finding more time to read, which we've already discussed, how can we boost our reading rate? How can we read the most books, in the least time, while remembering what we read? That's what we'll discover in this chapter.

First, we must dig a little more into why speed reading ultimately fails. Back in the 1960s, speed reading became all the rage. Magazine ads promised readers could devour whole books in minutes, and speed reading courses popped up across many schools. Evelyn Wood, widely considered the founder of the modern speed reading movement, claimed to read 6,000 words a minute while retaining everything she absorbed. (As a comparison, the average American reads 250 words per minute, so 6,000 words per minute is almost 25x faster.) Her "Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics" course was so popular that even President John F. Kennedy went through it.

But the tide slowly turned. People realized that while you *can* increase your reading speed, even significantly, speed is only part of reading well—and usually not the most important part.

Wood herself even came to see this. When rumors swirled that she could read a novel as fast as 15,000 words per minute, she responded, "Of course. But who would want to?" Even speed reading experts acknowledge there's a limit, that eventually you'll read so fast you're just wasting your time.

And that brings us to the biggest problem with speed reading: you lose the book's meaning. Speed reading can quicken your comprehension of what a book *says* (i.e., the words) but not what it *means*. That's controlled by your *thinking* speed, not your reading speed. Simply passing your eyes over black marks on a white page won't magically transmit their meaning to you. That only occurs when you comprehend the message.

Another problem is that speed reading disregards the chance to spend quality time with the greatest thinkers and writers in history. As Ryan Holiday affirms, "Reading is the quiet time in which you reflect and learn. It is not a race. It is where you teach yourself that which you don't know—it is your time with some of the smartest (or at least different) people who've ever lived. This is not something to be rushed through, but enjoyed, savored, and done deliberately."

If you were invited to dinner with your greatest living hero, you wouldn't just rush through the meal as fast as possible. You wouldn't say to your hero, "I really enjoy

spending a couple hours with you, but could we cut the small talk? I'm sure we could rush through this meal and conversation in about ten minutes, and I would still get the basic gist of what you'd like to tell me."

Nobody would do that, right? Well, the same goes for reading. Speed reading is empty and robs us of quality time with the author.

But if that's true, what a better alternative? The answer is *smart* reading.

Earlier, we've seen how good readers X-ray their books, giving them a quick sense of what each book is about before going deeper. But X-raying is different than speed reading. X-raying gives you a cursory picture of the book, helping you determine whether it's worth a deeper reading.

But speed reading is the opposite of deeper reading. Speed readers race through a book so they can quickly move on to the next one, even if they barely comprehended the first. That's a major difference.

Another difference between speed reading and X-raying is that speed readers get through lots of text quickly, while X-Raying helps you distinguish between irrelevant text and relevant text, so that you can *skip* over the irrelevant text and only read what matters. It's the difference between a man arbitrarily slinging his fishing line all over a lake and another man who calmly drops it in, only where he knows there are fish.

But how do you know where the fish are? Well, that comes through experience. Fisherman spend years on the water, practicing and honing their craft, and that's what smart readers do, too. They know the best way to read quickly is to become an experienced reader. Experience allows them to intuit which parts of the book to breeze through, and in which parts to drop anchor.

Speed readers only have one reading rate—super fast—while smart readers constantly shift gears. Tony Reinke offers a helpful analogy:

"Reading is like driving a moving truck through mountain highways. There are times to chug uphill in a low gear, and there are times to coast downhill in a high gear. Each book has its own terrain. Our reading speeds will change as we read, because different sections in books will be like muscling uphill or cruising downhill. Over time, you will begin to sense the terrain of a book, and

you will learn how to use different gears. Just be aware that the terrain can change. Some parts of a book can be read more quickly than others. The perceptive reader can read the terrain and shift gears in response.”

Now, with all that said, there is a benefit to *mildly* increasing your reading speed. You just don’t want to go crazy. Don’t think you’ll ever devour 300 pages of a novel before breakfast. But even bumping your rate from 250 words per minute to 300 words per minute can yield many more books per year. So with that in mind, here are simple ways to boost your reading rate:

**First, stop saying the words you read.** If you like to move your lips while reading, or sound words out in your head, that habit will really constrain you. Most people speak around 150 words per minute, but your mind can process 400 words per minute. See the difference? That means your lips or your inner voice are probably limiting your reading to 150 words per minute or less, even if your mind can handle over twice that speed. So, try to stop the chatter. If your lips are the culprit, try chewing gum or placing your index finger over your mouth while reading. It might seem awkward, but it’s been known to boost people’s reading rate. If your *inner* voice is to blame, just say the words faster inside your head, knowing that your brain can handle it.

**A second tip is to use a reading guide.** Mortimer Adler encouraged students to use their index fingers, pens, or bookmarks to track down the page as they read. Not only did this help them keep their place on the page, but as they increased the speed of their guide, moving it faster down the page, they typically read twice or three times as quick.

**Third, stop rereading.** One of the biggest time-sinks involves returning to past lines or paragraphs that you’ve already read. Fix that problem by placing an index card on top of your current sentence (not under it), and move the card down the page as you read. This prevents you from seeing lines you’ve already read and will improve your rate significantly. It also helps with comprehension because you can’t go back to the lines you just read, causing you to focus more intently on the current sentence.

Now, all of that will help, and most of us can achieve a slight boost without serious problems. The average person can typically speed up their reading by 50 words per minute without issue. But once you start reading at absurd speeds, at over 1,000 words per minute, you don’t just miss the forest for the trees—you miss the trees, too.

So forget about speed reading. Choose smart reading instead.

In the next lesson, we'll look at a key strategy for remembering more of what you read. Our goal isn't just to read more books. We also want to master and remember what we read. So stay tuned for the next lesson!