

Speed Reading For The Executive

A Look at the Real Purpose of Reading Programs

WALTER PAUK

The executive is continually seeking ways to save time and money, and to find ways, he is willing to put hard cash "on the line." It is this eagerness for "progress" which makes the executive an easy target for sellers of speed reading courses. The executive is the aggressor. He wants to buy.

Why does he seek this commodity of speed so eagerly? One answer is that the executive sees speed reading as the magic method for getting through stacks of reading matter quickly. He wants to get rid of that "snowed-under" feeling. He wants to zip through his reading with the efficiency and precision of a computer. But, being held back by his tacky reading techniques, he can't; so that stack does not dwindle, rather with each delivery of mail, another inch or two are added; consequently the thought, "I've got to take one of those speed reading courses" continues to flash through his mind more frequently and more urgently. Moreover, and still worse this nagging thought keeps interfering with his on-the-job efficiency.

Though highly successful in his profession, he feels, nevertheless, threatened

by the piles of unread issues. The threat stems from his feeling that he is not keeping up with developments in his field, that he is on the road to obsolescence, so he thinks.

Few things worry an executive so much as the thought that he is falling behind professionally. He does not want to fall so far behind that he'll have to be "retreaded"—a dreadful word to the proud executive. So, it is small wonder that the highly sensitive and self-criticizing executive is "sold" even before the "front-man" of a speed reading course says, "Gentlemen, time means money." With just so little said there are always enough hands raised to "force" the director to run two classes rather than one.

The instructional sessions begin, and enthusiasm runs high as the men, having overcome vocalization (lip and throat movements which belie the subaudible pronouncing of words), race through books, seize phrases, gobble up sentences, and even mentally photograph whole pages at a glance. And when words per minute are speedily calculated, hearts soar and self-satisfying smiles appear as

DR. WALTER PAUK is a Professor in the School of Education and has been Director of the Reading-Study Center at Cornell University since 1955. His book, "How to Study in College," has been published recently by Houghton Mifflin. He spent the past academic term at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, as a Fulbright Lecturer.

each executive whispers to himself, "600 yesterday, 800 today—not bad."

With your course over, and back on the job, sure enough, you can whisk through magazines, journals, and newspapers in no time flat. Ah! The problem has been licked!

High Speed - Low Comprehension?

But, one day just after zipping through an article in customary style, your curiously skeptical friend asks, "Tell me, what was the article about?" You are stopped by the abruptness of the question and frightened because no answer leaps to your rescue; then you defensively think, "What an unfair question. How tactless can you get?" At the same time, you feel a warm flush creeping over your face, and the room suddenly becomes too hot, and you become even hotter as you wonder whether he notices your color. Nevertheless you force the lips to stretch into a smile and in a voice which doesn't seem to belong to you, you try at casualness and somehow say, "Well, I really didn't read, I just skimmed." Your friend, who is really a friend, sees the situation and lets it drop; nevertheless you are glad to see him depart.

You affect anger and mutter a bit; but as the embarrassment leaves and your drive-level falls to a new low, you realize that the spell has been broken. You've been disenchanted.

So, as weeks go by, you find that the stacks of reading material are even higher than before, but now you don't care because you've been deceived—you sense that somehow reading at fantastic rates is a hoax; but what bothers you is

that you don't know why? After all, while taking the course, you *did* read at 6,000 words a minute; at least, the calculations showed that.

At home that evening while continuing to revolve in mind the problem of speed reading, you go to Dick's room to see whether the book on reading is in his last semester's stack. It is. You turn to the chapter, "The Myth of Speed Reading." The Chapter reads:

Let us reconstruct the act of reading. Reading involves: first, the physical seeing of the word; second, converting the printed symbol into meaning; third, understanding the meaning of each word or phrase in the context of the sentence; fourth, understanding the sentence in context of the paragraph; and fifth, understanding the paragraph in context of the whole.

It would be reasonable to suppose that for all these various steps to take place properly, the mind would have to linger—to focus—upon each word or meaningful phrase, at least, for a fleeting portion of a second. In other words, some time must be given to the thinking portion of reading. If no time is given to the thinking portion, then the 'reader' is merely going through a looking-at-words act.

It would seem, then, that if one's eyes were streaking along the printed pathways, moving so fast that they did not hold onto words long enough for the mind to focus on them, then it is hard to see how the true meaning of a word, a phrase, a sentence, a passage could be ascertained.

It may be true that many words could be recognized as words, but whether the mind can convert the onrushing words—words rushing in at 1000 per minute, or as some claim, 40,000 per minute—is highly improbable.

So, moving the eyes over the printed words is not necessarily reading. Even moving the mind over the printed words does not guarantee that one is perceiving the author's ideas, but, at least, such a reader has a chance of completing the com-

munications cycle. The 'reader' who moves only his eyes over the printed lines stands no chance at all.

Feeling that you have gained some understanding about the act of reading, you determine to find out whether speed reading is *method* or *myth*. You remember that they talked about a fellow who read at 40,000 words a minute—"a breakthrough in reading," they said. You wonder what 40,000 words a minute really means, so you pick up a novel close at hand and count words—there are about 300 on a page. Then by dividing 40,000 by 300, you get 133.

Now, you feel you are on grounds with which you can deal concretely. These figures show that to read 40,000 words a minute, you must cover 133 pages. You pause in amazement while the thought, "I wonder whether I can turn 133 pages in a minute," whizzes through your mind. Immediately you see the impossibility of really reading at such astronomical rates. You utter aloud, "Of course it's a myth."

The next day, armed with the facts, you can hardly restrain yourself as you stride into John's office. John took the speed reading course, too. You talk, but John smiles and seems unperturbed. "After all," he says, "that doesn't apply to me. I'm reading at the manageable rate of only 10,000."

You're startled by John's confidence as he settles back in his big chair and puffs a smoke ring—a rising, lazily revolving wreath of victory—which temporarily mesmerizes you.

The pencil and paper in hand bring you back to reality, and you begin dividing 300 into 10,000. Your eyes light up as you say, "Look here old boy. That's still 33 pages a minute. That means, let

me see, less than 2 seconds—2 fleeting seconds, my fine friend—per page."

"Remember, I can do a lot with two seconds per page," John defends.

Random Word Selection

"O.K., let's figure how much. During the 2 seconds, according to research based on eye-movement photography, your eyes are capable of picking up about 10 to 12 words a page, and, remember, you must seize these words almost randomly. Furthermore, as you read you must also turn the pages. This, too, takes time. So, after turning 33 pages in a minute you will have gathered randomly an assortment of 300 to 400 words."

"But a person can get the sense of what is in those 33 pages on the basis of 300 or so words," John cuts in.

"Well, if they were key words, perhaps. But, remember some of the verbiage that you pick up will be garbage—such words as: *the, of, at, in, a, etcetera*, which, you'll admit, don't mean much in themselves. It is hard for me to see how you can gain even superficial comprehension by merely looking at this assemblage, this conglomeration, of 300 to 400 disjointed words.

"O.K., Bob. Stop! Stop! Excuse me for putting up such a complacent front, but, I, too, began to wonder about how much I was getting out of zipping through my journals. I guess I was afraid to inspect too closely. The problem is still with us then. What do you suggest for getting through our stacks of stuff?"

"John, you had me scared for a moment. I thought, perhaps, I was the only one who couldn't fly over the printways.

I wonder how the other fellows are doing?"

"Yeah! I wonder, too."

A Procedure for Reading

"John, you asked what I suggest for getting through our professional reading, well, here is one answer. I found this in Dick's books. You know he took a reading course at college last spring. He brought home this paperback text. Here's what the professor wrote as advice to businessmen. Start reading here. No! Here."

... Before we begin, let me make clear that we are not talking about reading for pleasure, rather, reading for business. We can start with a general statement that it is practically impossible for us to read every word of every magazine, journal, newspaper, and brochure which come to our desks; so, we must be judiciously selective.

Let me tell you what I do: First I select very carefully the journals and magazines to which I subscribe, making my basis for selection, not "How many free issues will I get," but, "Do I really need this for my profession?"

Next, when a journal arrives, I make it a point to look over the table of contents immediately, and, on the basis of title and author, turn to the article which appears most pertinent to my interests. I thus insure motivation. I then read the conclusion of the article, and if the conclusion reveals something new, I turn to the beginning of the article to see how the author arrived at such a conclusion.

After finishing the article, and if the ideas presented are useful to me, I pause and try to see how I can make use of the ideas in my profession. In this way I gain something from the article and the few moments of consolidation and reflection on the ideas help to implant them in my

mind so that I can more readily recall the ideas at some future time. If, however, the ideas in the article are not new, then I quickly turn to another which I feel is second in importance to me.

Following this practice, I get through some issues of a journal in ten to fifteen minutes, disposing of them, thus "clearing the deck" to take on the next job. Of course, if the issue contains several articles which interest me, then the immediate reading of only the conclusions or summaries will, at least, prepare me to participate, to some modest degree, in a discussion of these articles during lunch with my friends and associates. Of course, to do justice to the articles, I take them home that evening for a closer perusal, and I'm continually surprised at how quickly I can glean from these articles that which I want by having already read the conclusions and summaries.

Remember! The guiding principle is to read only that which interests you, and even then, read only those portions of the article which you need to gain meaning; pause to reflect on the ideas gained to see how they apply to you; then go on to another article or journal. Do not put the journal aside with the thought, "Well, I'll read it someday." Be resolute. Either the article is important to read right now or tonight, or it isn't; so let's make our reading as much a business as we make of other things pertaining to our professions.

Don't save the magazine because you've found an idea or two which might be useful; rather write these ideas on 5 x 8 cards—one idea per card—give the idea a title, at the bottom of the card jot down the name of the journal, year, and page number; then discard it or pass it on to someone else. This procedure will not only clear your desk, but your mind as well, as leaving you free to do the next task more efficiently. Actually, a chain reaction could be started—one thing done efficiently leads to another and another.

Well, try the system—and good luck.

BIOGRAPHICAL LISTING

1. "Teaching College Freshmen to Read," *Phi Delta Kappa*, 38 (Dec. 1956), 104-109.
2. "The Cornell University Reading Improvement Program," *Techniques and Procedures in College and Adult Reading Programs: The Sixth Yearbook of the Southwest Reading Conference for Colleges and Universities*, Oscar S. Causey, Editor. Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1957, pp. 16-22.
3. "Objectives of a Reading Journal," *Journal of Developmental Reading*, 1, (Winter 1958), 69.
4. "Basic Skills Needed in College Reading," International Reading Association Conference Proceedings, *Reading for Effective Living*, 3 (1958), 44-46.
5. "Are Present Reading Tests Valid for Both Girls and Boys?," *Journal of Educational Research*, 53 (March 1960), 279-280.
6. "College Reading and Study Skills Center at Cornell University," *Journal of Developmental Reading*, 3 (Spring 1960), 183-189.
7. "Achieving Personal Maturity Through Reading by Developing an Interest in Reading," International Reading Association Conference Proceedings, *New Frontiers in Reading*, 5 (1960), 87-91.
8. *How to Study in College*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962.
9. "Emphasizing Study Skills," *College Reading Association*, 3 (Summer 1962), 31-35.
10. "Responsibilities of a Writer," *The Journal of the Reading Specialist*, 2 (Sept. 1962), 6-7.
11. "Effectiveness of Different Methods of Study," (abstract), *The Journal of the Reading Specialist*, 2 (Dec. 1962), 32.
12. "Reading and Speed Reading," *The English Record*, 13 (Feb. 1963), 20-27.
13. "You Can Learn to Study," *The Beta Theta Pi*, 90 (Mar. 1963) 346-349.
14. "What's the Best Way to Predict Success in Shorthand?," *Business Education World*, 43 (April 1963), 7-9.
15. "Helping Students Appreciate Literature," *Journal of Developmental Reading*, 6 (Winter 1963), 136-139.
16. "You Can Learn to Study," *The Chi Phi Chakett*, 47 (Apr. 1963), 5-7.
17. "Effective Study. By Francis P. Robinson," Book Review, *The American Journal of Psychology*, 76 (Mar. 1963), 171-172.
18. "Effective Study. By Francis P. Robinson," Book Review, *The Journal of the Reading Specialist*, 2 (June 1963), 56-57.
19. "Does Note-Taking Interfere with Listening Comprehension?," *Journal of the Developmental Reading*, 6 (Summer 1963), 276-278.
20. "On Scholarship: Advice to High School Students," *The Reading Teacher*, 17 (Nov. 1963), 73-78.
21. Abstract of "Helping Students to Appreciate Literature," by Walter J. Pauk, *Reading in High School*, I (Fall 1963), 24-25.
22. "Comparison of the Validities of Selected Test Procedures to Predict Shorthand Success," *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 23 (Winter 1963), 831-835.
23. "The Reading Expert Takes the Final Exam," *Journal of the Reading Specialist*, 3 (March 1964), 40-43.
24. "Mastering the Textbook," *Reading in High School*, Volume 1, (Winter 1964), No. 2, 42-45.