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SPEED READING

Why is it so important to read?

How do I increase my reading focus and comprehension?

How can I get more out of every reading experience?

What do Oprah Winfrey, Thomas Edison, John F. Kennedy, and Bill Gates all have in common? They were all great readers. Leaders are readers.

Welcome to the age of data. Never in history has there been such an information surplus. More information has been produced in the past few decades than in the previous few thousand years. According to Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, “There were 5 Exabytes of information created between the dawn of civilization through 2003, but that much information is now created every 2 days.” And it’s only getting faster and faster. All of this information makes today’s age extremely competitive. Those people who can keep up with the latest information will have the competitive edge needed to succeed, not only academically and professionally, but in other key areas of life as well.

Studies show that there is a direct relationship between your ability to read and your success

in life. Skilled readers enjoy better jobs, higher incomes, and greater opportunities for success in all realms of life. Think about this: If you have average reading skills, then you have the same understanding that most people have. That doesn't give you much of a competitive advantage, does it?

Unfortunately, for most people reading is regarded as a boring task, something very time-consuming and tedious. Have you ever gone through a page in a book and found yourself asking, "What on earth did I just read?" If the answer is yes, you are not alone.

We've talked before about the challenges I faced early in my college career. As you know, those challenges were so great for me that I seriously considered quitting school altogether. But as I rose to the task of reading a book every week in addition to the reading I needed to do for my classes, I started to make considerable progress

with my learning. I didn't realize how much progress I'd made, though, until one surprising day.

Growing up, I've always tried to keep myself out of the spotlight. I was a shy kid, and I felt more comfortable blending into the scenery than being front and center. That continued when I went away to school. Big classes held in lecture halls were especially appealing to me, because I could sit in the corner and avoid being noticed.

I was in one such classroom one day along with a few hundred other students. Up front, the professor was lecturing to us and using an overhead projector to show images. At one point, he put some text up on the projector, and I instantly burst into laughter. This was an entirely natural reaction for me; the quote was funny. But it was otherwise completely quiet in the hall, which caused a huge number of people to swivel their heads in my direction. I'm guessing most

of these people would never have been able to identify me as one of their classmates before this moment.

I was hugely embarrassed. I'd made so much effort to be invisible, and now it was as though I'd stormed the stage to draw attention to myself. I was blushing so hard that I thought my face was going to combust, and I shrank back as far as I could.

Then several seconds later, others in the hall started laughing. At first, I thought they were laughing at me, but as more joined them, I looked out and noticed that they weren't staring at me at all; they were reading the text. And that's when I realized the source of my embarrassment: I'd read the words so much faster than my classmates that I'd reacted to it way sooner than everyone else. I'd known I improved the speed at which I read and the level at which I comprehended it, but until that moment I had

no idea how rare but learnable an ability it was.

While still feeling a bit awkward about my unintended outburst, I left that class buoyed by the understanding that my learning had risen to an entirely new level. Due to the techniques I'd taught myself, reading had become one of my superpowers, paving the way to enormous breakthroughs in my learning. While I vowed not to laugh so loudly in the future, I walked out of that lecture hall with an incredible sense of excitement about learning and about discovering the other superpowers that were just emerging.

HOW READING MAKES YOUR BRAIN LIMITLESS

Any plan to make your learning limitless needs to include reading. Just as memory is foundational to nearly all brain function, reading is foundational to nearly all learning. If anyone

tells you that they don't read, they're essentially saying, "I've stopped trying to learn." Yes, you can learn something from watching videos, listening to podcasts, or going to the movies. Even the silliest network sitcom is likely to teach you *something*. But it is nearly impossible to make learning a dynamic and renewable part of your life without a dedicated approach to reading. Here's why this is true:

- **Reading kicks your brain into gear.** When you read, you're using your brain for many functions at once—which is a vigorous and rewarding workout. As Dr. Ken Pugh, president and director of research at Haskins Laboratories, points out, "Parts of the brain that have evolved for other functions—such as vision, language, and associative learning—connect in a specific neural circuit for reading, which is very challenging. A sen-

tence is shorthand for a lot of information that must be inferred by the brain."¹ In other words, reading gives you an incomparable level of mental exercise, and the brain is always a "muscle" that gets stronger the more you challenge it.

- **Reading improves your memory.** Because you're giving your brain such a great workout when you read, your brain functions at a higher level. One significant benefit of this is with regard to memory. In a study conducted by Dr. Robert S. Wilson at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, reading was shown to have a meaningful effect on memory decline. "We shouldn't underestimate the effects of everyday activities, such as reading and writing, on our children, ourselves, and our parents or grandparents," he noted. "Our study suggests that exercising your brain by taking part in activities

such as these across a person's lifetime, from childhood through old age, is important for brain health in old age."²

- **Reading improves your focus.** One of the things we do when we sit down with a book or even spend some dedicated time with a newspaper is train our focus on this one thing. Unlike when we browse the Internet or click through YouTube, when we're reading, we usually give the vast majority of our attention to what we're reading. This practice makes it easier to apply the same level of focus to other tasks.
- **Reading improves your vocabulary.** Some people just sound smarter. How do you react when you encounter one of these people? In all likelihood, you offer them increased respect and even a certain level of deference. People who sound smart tend to have access

to and a facility with a wider vocabulary than the average person. Reading allows you to build vocabulary organically. The more you read, the more you are exposed to an expanded range of language and the use of that language in a variety of contexts. And because reading is such a superior focusing tool, you're absorbing a great deal of this, and it will be accessible to you as you need it.

- **Reading improves your imagination.** If you were ever given a story prompt at school or at work, you know that it is often easier to think creatively when using a tool to get started. Reading is essentially one story prompt after another. "What would it be like to be in this person's shoes?" "How can I use this technique to be more productive?" "What am I going to do first, once Jim Kwik helps me become limitless?" A great imagination helps you see more possibilities

in your life, and reading keeps your imagination on high alert.

- **Reading improves understanding.** Learning comes in many forms, and learning as a success tool has many elements. And while agile thinking and mastery of skills are critical to success, empathy and understanding can't be overlooked. Reading exposes you to lives you'd never known before, experiences you'd never imagined, and modes of thinking far different from your own. All of this builds both your empathy for others and your understanding of how the world works beyond yourself.

KWIK START

If you can read faster with greater comprehension and enjoyment, what books would you

start reading this month? Create a list of three books you want to start reading.

READING SELF-ASSESSMENT

The first thing you must do is discover your present reading speed, also known as your base rate. This reading rate is measured in words per minute. In order to measure it, you will need an easy reading novel, a pencil, and a timer. Then do the following:

1. Set an alarm to go off in two minutes.
2. Read at a comfortable speed and stop when the alarm goes off (put a mark where you left off).
3. Count the total number of words in three regular lines, and divide that number by three. This is the average number of words per line.

4. Count the number of lines you just read (only count those lines that at least make it halfway across the page)
5. Multiply the number of words per line by the number of lines you just read (multiply your answers from steps 3 and 4).
6. Divide this number by two (because you read for two minutes) and this is your words per minute. Do this now. It is critical to have this exercise completed before moving on. Write down your current reading speed.

The average person's reading speed can usually be found somewhere between 150 to 250 words per minute. This range varies with the difficulty of the material. If you are reading much below 100 words per minute, the material may be too difficult or you may want to seek remedial help (the skills you learn here will still be of great

value).

Let's say a person reads at 200 words per minute. This person reads and studies for four hours a day. A person who reads at 400 words per minute (twice as fast) needs only to study for half as much time. A faster reader saves at least two hours each day.

KWIK START

If you can save two hours each day, what would you do with this extra time? Take a moment to write down how you would spend those extra two hours daily.

CHALLENGES TO READING

People either don't read or choose to read very little for a variety of reasons. You work long hours,

and you're exhausted at the end of the day. It's easier to be entertained passively (through television, film, music, etc.) than to engage in the activity required to read. If you're going to work for your entertainment, you'd rather be playing a videogame. I hear you, but if you've absorbed the benefits I just listed above, you know that you need to fit some time into your day—every day—to read.

Another key reason why people don't read is that they find it a laborious process. It can take them five minutes to get through a single page in a book, making the idea of reading a 300-page book akin to walking from New York to Georgia. People tend to read slowly for a few reasons. One is that they stopped learning to read relatively early—maybe second or third grade—and their reading level (and, more importantly, their reading technique) never increased much beyond this, even as they continued to learn in spite

of this constraint. The other is that they don't allow themselves to focus when they're reading. They're listening for the kids, half-watching television, checking e-mail every few minutes, and so on. They therefore find themselves reading the same paragraph over and over again, because they're not focused enough to comprehend what they're reading.

There are a couple of primary reasons why people read slowly. Your reading efficiency is made up of two main parts: Your reading rate (speed) and reading comprehension (understanding). Before we look at various ways to increase your reading efficiency, we first need to look at three of the barriers and obstacles that prevent us from reading more quickly.

1. Regression

Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever read a line in a book and found yourself reread-

ing that same line again? Or do you ever find yourself “wander reading” (going back mindlessly and rereading words)? *Regression* is a term used to describe the tendency that your eyes have to go back and reread certain words. Almost everyone does it to some degree, and most of the time it is done subconsciously. By doing so, people believe they will increase their comprehension, but usually they hamper it. By regressing, or back-skipping, it is very easy to lose the meaning and essence of your reading. Regression seriously disrupts the reading process as well as slows down reading speed.

2. Outdated Skills

Reading is not so much a measure of intelligence as it is a skill and with any skill, it can be learned and improved. When was the last time you took a class called reading? For most, it was back in the 4th or 5th grade. And if you're like most

people, your reading skill is probably still the same as it was back then. Here's the challenge: Has the amount and difficulty of what you're reading changed since? The complexity of material has likely increased dramatically, yet our reading skill has remained the same.

3. Subvocalization

Subvocalization is a fancy word for your inner voice. Do you notice a voice inside that is saying the words as you read this? Hopefully, it's your own voice. Subvocalization limits your reading speed to only a couple hundred words per minute. That means your reading speed is limited to your talking speed, not your thinking speed. In reality, your mind can read a lot faster.

Where did subvocalization come from? It occurred, for most people, when you were first learning to read. Then it was necessary for you to read out loud so that your teacher knew you

were doing it correctly. Do you remember when you would have to get into a circle with the other children and you each took turns reading aloud? For a lot of us, this was a very stressful event. There was a lot of pressure on you to say the word properly. How you pronounced the word was very important. It was then that your brain made the association: If I want to understand a word when I am reading, I must be able to correctly say it.

Later on, you were told to no longer read aloud, but rather silently, to yourself. This is when you internalized that “reading voice,” and most of us have been doing it ever since. In essence, you believe if you don’t hear the words, then you won’t understand the words. This is not the case.

Here’s an example: We know that President John F. Kennedy was a very fast reader, reading somewhere between 500 and 1200 words per minute. He brought speed-reading instructors to

train his staff. He also gave speeches at approximately 250 words per minute. Clearly, when he was reading, there were a lot of words he wasn’t saying in his mind. It is not necessary to say the words in order to understand them.

Take a moment and think about a specific car, yours or someone else’s. What does it look like? What color is it? Do this now.

What was it that you thought about? You might have said, “It is blue, has four tires, and brown leather seats.” Question: Did the words *blue*, *tires*, or *leather* appear in your mind, or did you picture a car with all of these things? For most of us, our minds think primarily in images, and not words. As we discussed in the previous chapter on memory, words are just a tool we use to communicate our thoughts or pictures.

As you are reading, you can greatly increase both your speed and comprehension by visualizing the material. It is not necessary to “say” all

of the words, as it takes too much time, just as you don't read and say "period, comma, question mark," when you see them in a sentence. You wouldn't read a sentence like this: "I just bought some avocados comma blueberries comma and broccoli period." You understand that punctuation marks are just symbols that represent various meanings.

Words are symbols as well. You've seen 95 percent of the words you read before. You don't need to pronounce those words, just as you don't need to pronounce filler words like *because*, *this*, or *the*. You know them by sight, not by sound. It is the meaning of what the word represents that is important. And the meaning is usually better described and remembered in the form of pictures. Understanding this concept is the first step in reducing subvocalization.

READING MISCONCEPTIONS

Myth 1: Faster Readers Don't Comprehend Well

This is a rumor spread around by slow readers, and it is not true. In fact, faster readers often have better comprehension than slower readers. Here's an analogy: When you're taking a slow drive down a quiet street, you can be doing many things. You may be listening to the radio, drinking a green juice, waving to a neighbor, and singing your favorite song. Your attention is not in any one place; it just flows and wanders.

But imagine you're driving pedal to the metal down a racetrack taking hairpin turns. Do you have more focus or less? I would bet that you are very focused on what is in front, behind, and ahead of you. You're not thinking about your dry cleaning. The same holds true for reading. The key to better reading comprehension is focus and concentration. But some people read

so slowly that they completely bore their own minds. A bored mind doesn't concentrate well. Your mind can handle vast amounts of information, and yet most people as they read feed it one . . . word . . . at . . . a . . . time. This is starving the brain.

If your mind ever wanders and daydreams, this could be the reason. If you don't give your brain the stimulus it needs, it'll seek entertainment elsewhere in the form of distraction. You may find yourself wondering what you'll have for dinner, what to wear on your date tomorrow, or listening to a conversation out in the hall. We've asked before about reading a page or a paragraph and not remembering what you've just read. It may be because you read so slowly that you bored your brain and it simply lost interest. Or, you may be using reading as a sedative and you fall asleep. By reading faster, you keep your mind stimulated, find yourself more

focused, and have better comprehension.

Myth 2: It's Harder and Takes More Effort to Read Fast

Reading faster requires *less* effort, primarily because trained readers tend not to back-skip as much as slower readers. Slow readers stop at words, reread them, go to another word, regress to a previous one, and so on, and this continues throughout their reading. This takes a lot more effort and is extremely draining and boring. Faster readers go through words much easier and in a lot less time. This makes them more efficient because they put in less time, and get more out of the process!

Myth 3: Faster Readers Can't Appreciate Reading

This is not true either. You don't have to study the individual brushstrokes of a work of art in



order to appreciate it. Likewise, you do not have to study each and every word in a book, to realize its value. One of the best things about being a trained reader is flexibility. Faster readers have the option of speeding through boring/nonessential material and slowing down or even rereading the exciting/important information. Flexibility is power. Faster readers appreciate reading most material because they know it will not take all day.

VISUAL PACER: GIVE YOUR READING THE FINGER

You were probably told as a child not to use your finger to point to the words when you're reading. The traditional belief is that doing so will slow down your reading. But as children know naturally, using your finger as a guide keeps your eyes focused and prevents them from wander-

ing. Using your finger to read actually increases your reading speed because your eye is attracted to motion.

It is one thing to know this intellectually; it's another for you to experience it. Let's practice using your finger by rereading what you used for your [assessment](#) earlier. Start from the beginning and use your finger to track the words. End where you originally left off. Do not worry about comprehension and don't time this because it is just practice. The purpose of this exercise is for you to become familiar with using your finger while reading.

When you are done, set the alarm for two minutes. Start from where you ended during your first assessment. Continue reading until the alarm goes off. Figure out your new reading rate (based on the original formula), and write down your new reading speed.

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Studies show that the use of the finger while reading can increase your reading rate anywhere from 25 percent to 100 percent. The more you practice using this technique, the better your results will be. It may be a little awkward at first, just like it was when you first learned how to drive, but be patient and remember that it always takes more effort to sharpen your skills

first than it does to bulldoze your way through learning later.

Reading with your finger also introduces another one of your senses, the sense of touch, into the learning process. Much as your sense of smell and sense of taste are closely tied, your sense of sight and sense of touch are also very closely linked. Have you ever tried to show something new to a child? The child's natural instinct is to want to touch the object.

Using your finger also dramatically decreases regression, and is one of the reasons why your reading speed increases with this practice. Your eyes are naturally attracted to motion, so by moving your finger forward, your eyes are much less likely to regress backward.

Practice reading with your finger, this tool alone will significantly increase your speed and comprehension and will revolutionize your

learning. If your finger gets tired, practice using your whole arm, moving it back and forth. It's a bigger muscle and will not tire as easily.

HOW TO READ EVEN FASTER

Here are some more tools that will help you to become an accelerated reader:

1. Reading Is Like Exercising

When you go to work out, you cannot expect your muscles to grow if you pamper them. You need to push your muscles to where they are a little uncomfortable in order for them to grow. The same applies to reading. If you push yourself to read faster, your "reading muscles" will become stronger, and what was once hard, becomes easy. You can read faster, simply by training yourself to read faster. Those of you who run

know this. When you are running on a treadmill, if you practice regularly, you can watch yourself run at faster and faster levels. The levels that were once hard become easy a week later, because you have pushed yourself to a higher degree of excellence.

To increase your speed, even more, try this exercise: You will need an easy-reading novel, a pencil, and a watch or timer:

1. Read comfortably (using your finger or a visual pacer) for 4 minutes. Set the alarm to go off in 4 minutes and read as you normally would read. Mark the line when your alarm goes off. This is going to be your “finish line.”
2. Now set your alarm for 3 minutes. The goal here is to reach the finish line before your alarm goes off. Then read (using your finger) until the line in step 1 in 3 minutes.

3. Set your alarm for 2 minutes. Don't worry about comprehension. Try to get to the finish line before your alarm goes off in 2 minutes. Use a visual pacer and go through it line by line. Have your eyes follow your finger as fast as possible.
4. Final stretch. Set your timer for 1 minute. Do your best to get to the finish line in one minute. Do not skip any line, and don't worry about comprehension right now.
5. Now breathe. Set your timer for 2 minutes. Start from your finish line to read a new section. Read at a comfortable rate with comprehension. Count the number of lines you read, multiply by the number of words per line, then divide this number by two. This is your new reading rate. Write it down.

How did that feel? By doing this exercise, you will notice that your rate has increased. Here's an analogy: If you are driving on the highway at 65 mph, and then slow down to 40 mph for some mild traffic, you will notice quite a bit of difference. This is because you are used to driving at a higher speed. But in reality, you are not going very slowly, because it is all relative.

The same principle applies to reading. If you push yourself to read two or three times faster than what you are used to, when you finally decrease your rate to a comfortable speed, your original rate feels slow.

You want to practice this 4-minute exercise at least once a day until you reach a level that you are pleased and satisfied with. Schedule your reading. Just as with exercising, you cannot expect to work out only one time and be done for life. You must read on a regular basis, otherwise

your reading muscles will grow weak.

2. Expand Your Peripheral Vision

Your peripheral vision is the span of letters or words that your eyes can see in a single glance. By increasing your peripheral vision, you will be able to see and take in more words at a time. Most people were taught to read only one word at a time. But in fact, you are capable of reading more than that.

When you first learned to read, you were taught that letters made up larger structures, called words. As a child, you would sound out a word by its letters. For example, the word *report* would be broken down into letters so that you could understand it, *R-E-P-O-R-T*. Now that you are older, you are not as aware of the letters as you are reading, you see the larger units, known as words.

One of the reasons why people have a limited reading speed is because they read one word at a time. But if you put the word *card* at the end of the *report*, you get *REPORT CARD*. These two words have their own distinct meanings, but your mind sees them as one unit. Just as your mind is capable of seeing these two words together, it is also capable of seeing groups of words at the same time. By doing so, you will take your reading speed to even greater heights. Just as you see the words and not the individual letters, skilled readers see groups of words (or ideas) and not the individual words. See [Additional tips](#) below that you can use to condition yourself to “see” more.

3. Counting

By using the exercises I’ve outlined, the challenge of subvocalization will begin to decrease.

The process of reading faster naturally makes it more difficult to say all the words, even inside your head. When you have passed a certain rate (about 300 to 350 words per minute), it will be impossible to subvocalize all the words. As you hit this threshold, your brain will begin to make the shift from saying the words to seeing them more as images. Reading a book will be more like watching a movie.

Counting is another tool you can use to drown out this inner voice. The process is deceptively simple: count out loud as you are reading, “one, two, three . . .” and so on. You’ll find it is very difficult to count out loud and talk inside (subvocalize) at the same time. Doing this process conditions you to subvocalize less, allowing you to see the words rather than say them, thus leading to better speed and comprehension.

People tend to remember and understand what they *see*, more than what they *hear*. This makes sense, as most people can recall someone's face they see, more than the name they hear. By practicing these other exercises, your reading speed will improve because you are no longer saying every word. Initially, you may be a little confused (and your comprehension may even decrease), but in a very short time, your mind will grow bored of counting and will eventually stop. With practice, your comprehension will soon increase and expand because you will be able to more fully see and understand the material.

SUCCESS STORIES

I could fill an entire book with speed-reading success stories from students, and we post them

regularly on social media. Here's one we received today. Sarah was a very slow reader, had difficulty focusing, and felt it impossible to remember names and events. After years of struggle in this arena, she was convinced that there was very little chance she'd ever be capable of improving her reading ability or her ability to study.

In my programs, I make it a point to reassure my students that we are not aiming for perfection but for progress, and this resonated with Sarah. She realized she had been looking for complicated solutions, but that the tools and techniques we teach—which are easy to ignore or overlook because they are simple—were the best to use. She decided to show up with dedication and do her best, no matter what doubts she might have.

The results speak for themselves; Sarah's reading speed is now three times faster—she went from reading 253 words per minute to 838 words per minute. She starts her day by reading, which starts each morning with positive momentum and makes her feel like she's already achieved something for the day.

Lou, another student, also experienced a profound difference in his reading ability once he learned a technique that could truly help him. Lou excelled at high-level left-brained topics such as engineering and math and obtained a bachelor of science in electrical engineering. But he struggled in every single English class he ever took. Throughout his school years, he had enormous trouble understanding the words he was reading and comprehending the lessons behind them. In fact, he's convinced that he graduated only because his teachers gave him undeserved

Cs out of sympathy.

ADDITIONAL READING TIPS.

- Hold your book upright. If the book is flat on your desk, you may be doing one of two things, either
 1. looking at the print at an angle versus directly, thus putting unnecessary strain on your eyes, or
 2. you will be slouched over in order to see the print clearly, and this (as you know) disrupts the flow of oxygen through your body and makes you feel tired.
- Read for only 20 to 25 minutes at a time. Remember primacy and regency. Also, if your

eyes ever get tired or feel strained, take a break. Close your eyes and let them rest.

- Make reading a habit. Those who have reached a high degree of success in life are almost always avid readers. Great readers read often. The key is to make reading a habit. Give yourself this gift.

When he was 35, Lou began to take lessons to learn how to read. These were helpful, but he still found himself at a second-grade reading level after four years of work. This was a vast improvement from where he had been, but it wasn't nearly what he wanted, and he continued to be frustrated with his inability to master words and concepts. A big part of the problem was that he had been trying to learn by rote

memorization—reading the same passages over and over in the hope that he would absorb what he was reading. But he consistently found himself having learned nothing by the end of the page.

While he had made significant progress, finding programs was the key for Lou. As our memory program taught him how to absorb the material he was reading, he began to take a little more time to visualize words as he read them, and he used his left hand as a pacer to help stimulate the right side of his brain. Finally, for the first time, he found himself reading books and understanding them.

KWIK START

Block out at least 15 minutes each day for reading and put it in your calendar like an important

appointment. Commit to making reading part of your daily habit.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

Unlimiting your reading and learning will offer you an unparalleled level of freedom. People who make the most of their capacity to learn find themselves experiencing the world with a sense of mastery and with the confidence that no task or challenge will intimidate them. Visit www.LimitlessBook.com/resources and put what you learned here into practice. You can watch an hour speed-reading masterclass where I walk you through these methods. Before we get to the next chapter, try a few things:

- Identify a current reading habit that you'd like to change. Any transformation requires

you to acknowledge what's holding you back and notice when it shows up during your practice.

- Practice reading with a visual pacer each day. Schedule your reading, for even 10 minutes each day, to build your “reading muscle.”
- Make a list of the books you would like to read this month and write down what can change in your life when you finish reading them.
- Take my speed-reading online masterclass (free) at www.jimkwik.com/reading.