READING SPEED DEVELOPMENT

While reading speed is one of the most important factors in determining how a student progresses and succeeds in the educational system, almost all of the attention given to reading is directed at students who have reading difficulties. Students who read functionally, even if inadequately, are generally given little or no help in improving their reading skills. This is unfortunate for it takes relatively little time and effort to achieve significant improvements in student reading-speeds.

It is suggested that the exercises which follow be used on a daily basis, in 15-20 minute blocks of time, over a two to three week period. It is also suggested that the exercises be varied in type and duration to prevent student boredom. Before informing students that you are doing anything with respect to their reading speeds, establish the base reading speed for each student. The simplest way to do this is to have each student select a book with which she/he feels comfortable. Have the students read for a one-minute period of time and circle the last word read. Ask each to count the number of words read and require each to record the WPM rate on an individual tally sheet. Most of the WPM rates will probably be 250 WPM or fewer because most weak readers are sub-vocalizers. They can read no faster than they if they were actually saying the words aloud. When students learn to read mentally, rather than sub-vocally, there is usually a significant increase in their reading speeds.

1. One of the major hindrances to a good reading speed is the tendency among many students to back-track and re-read some word or phrase in the text.

   • **Exercise:** Ask the students to read normally for a further one-minute period. Inquire as to how many found themselves back-tracking. Stress that for the next few weeks they are never to do this even if they lose the sense of the sentence they are reading. Let them practice for three to five minutes at normal reading speed. On every day that you conduct reading-speed exercises, mention that they must avoid back-tracking.

2. Most students are lazy readers and have poorly developed eye-muscles. The exercise, which follows should, initially, be conducted for only short periods of time. Intersperse it with periods when students read at normal, or slightly above normal, speeds. Over time, their eye-muscles will strengthen and they will be able to endure more extended periods of rapid reading. Gradually increase the high-speed reading periods.

   • **Exercise:** Read as rapidly as you can, without backtracking, for one minute. Don’t worry if you miss some minor point in the text, but don’t read so rapidly that you lose contact with the general sense of what is in the material you are reading. Have the students count the words read and record the total on their tally sheets. For the first two or three classes simply have students alternate among periods when they read as rapidly as possible, at normal speed, a bit above normal speed, etc.

3. Some students will make significant improvements as a result of the above exercises, and some will not. The following practice may work for some or all of your students.

   • **Exercise:** With your hand flat and palm up, place it on the page you are going to read with your two forefingers directly beneath the words you are going to read. Move your hand along the line from left to right and try to keep up with it as you read. Let your hand drag your eyes
along with it. For the next two or three classes have students work on this skill for roughly half of the class-time allotted to exercises. Have them do so through a series of commands such as “normal speed”; “a bit faster” “faster still” and so forth. Record the normal, hand free, reading speed at the end of class.

4. Another major impediment to reading speed has to do with the number of eye-fixations per line required by the reader. Almost all weak readers fixate on both the first, and last, words in a line when reading. Such readers have poorly developed peripheral vision skills but, with practice, these skills can be improved.

- **Exercise:** Take a ruler and pencil and place two vertical lines on each of the next five pages. The first line on each page should be two centimeters (1 inch) inside the text at the left of the page, and the second should be two centimeters (1 inch) inside the text at the right of the page. Mark lightly because you will eventually have to erase these lines. Using the hand-as-guide procedure, read the text on the page at normal reading speed, but do not look directly at either the word or words to the left of the left-side line, or the words to the right of the rightside line. Repeat this entire process with a further five pages of text. This time, try reading, at normal speed, without your hand to guide you. This is the most critical skill of all for an improved reading speed. When students feel they have learned it, have them practice it further but at gradually higher reading rates. As you should at the end of each class, have them record their normal reading speeds and also their absolute best reading-speed using all of the skills you have taught them. The research indicates that this latter speed, if you continue to stress the importance of reading, will eventually be very close to their normal reading speeds.

**Some Final Comments:**

- There is a general belief among students that reading rapidly does not facilitate good retention of content. This is nonsense. Good readers adapt their reading speeds to the difficulty of the material. Almost invariably, good readers are among the more successful.

- During the process of the above exercises some students will complain of sore eyes, and a few may even develop headaches. This is normal and you may want to warn them of it.

- Make a point of telling you students that poor reading speeds are not a reflection of intelligence. Rather, they are a reflection of poor reading instruction.

- If you don’t have some on-going type of reading program, you might want to develop one.

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