**Double Your Reading Rate**

Reading is an incredibly important skill to have. Just about any form of education will involve reading, sometimes almost exclusively. You can often make yourself an expert on an intellectual subject just by reading enough in that area. But despite the incredible importance of reading, most people are wildly inefficient at it. Like a child that never goes beyond a crawl, most people have enough reading skills to move around, but they are far from running.

Over a year ago I picked up the book,[**Breakthrough Rapid Reading**](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2FBreakthrough-Rapid-Reading-Peter-Kump%2Fdp%2F073520019X%3Fie%3DUTF8%26s%3Dbooks%26qid%3D1174671556%26sr%3D1-1&tag=scottcom-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325)**http://www.assoc-amazon.com/e/ir?t=scottcom-20&l=ur2&o=1** by Peter Kump, an expert in the area of speed-reading. From that purchase I took the time and energy to study other ways to improve my reading skill. I recently got a chance to finish Eckhart Tolle’s, The Power of Now, and I read the last half of the book in under forty minutes.

When I did the initial test at the start of the book, I could read at 450 words per minute. A little above the average of around 300, but nothing spectacular. By using the techniques I’ll describe in this article I was able to increase that rate to around 900 words per minute in average situations, at least doubling of my reading rate.

I believe there are six major keys to improving your reading skill. Like all skills, success only comes through practice, so just reading this article won’t be enough. But if you are interested in how you might be able to make dramatic improvements in both speed and comprehension, I’ve found these six points to be the best start.

**1) Remember, Reading is Not Linear**

How do you read a book? Likely from start to finish, never going back and never skipping any sections. This is probably one of the most inefficient ways to read. The beauty of text is that it is non-linear. You can skip down to read only my main bullet points, or read them in practically any order. Although the pattern of start to finish might be a simple one, it isn’t always the most effective.

For most books I do read in a roughly start to finish fashion. But I frequently re-read passages that I want to get a greater understanding of and completely skim over passages that I feel are redundant or unnecessary. Good writers generally add anecdotes or metaphors to improve understanding of a concept which you can skim over top of if you already get their point. Similarly, bad writers often go short on explanation of complex details so re-reading can allow your brain the time to form the concepts.

Not only is reading non-linear but it doesn’t have a set pace. Although I read some books at about 900 words per minute, I slow down to 200 if the passage I am reading is particularly information dense or complicated. Similarly I can skim at over 1500 words per minute if I’m reading mostly fluff. Saying I can read at 900 wpm is like saying I can drive at 100 km/h. Speed reading isn’t just about faster but pacing yourself for the specific reading task you face.

Most people read a book as if it were given to them as a speech. They listen to the author and follow along with what he is saying in a purely sequential manner. In order to reach faster rates of comprehension you have to learn to abandon this tactic. You can start this by not subvocalizing.

**2) Stop Subvocalizing**

When you started to read you probably read out loud. Your elementary school teacher wanted you to read the book and say the words aloud. After you mastered this skill, you were told to simply say the words inside your head and read quietly. This is where most reading education and skill levels end.

To move to a new level you need to stop sounding the words inside your head or subvocalizing. Subvocalizing takes time, more time than is necessary to comprehend the words you are reading. It is almost impossible to go much beyond 400 or 500 words while subvocalizing. Instead you need to train yourself to read without hearing the words in your head.

But for most people this has become such an ingrained reading habit that they don’t realize that subvocalization is a distinct process to comprehension. If I read at around a thousand words per minute, there is no way I could hear the words in my head while trying to process them. Instead I simply see the word and my brain automatically constructs what has been written. I’ll understand a line of text that I looked over in a second, even though it may have taken at least five just to say the words in my head.

Since most people currently can’t separate the subvocalization from comprehension, they are locked in at a rate of about 400-500 words. Moving beyond that rate requires that you practice reading faster than you can actually read.

Edit: I’ve done a follow-up to explain subvocalization more as I think this post may have confused people a little. Check it out here: [Speed Reading Follow-Up](http://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2007/03/22/speed-reading-follow-up/)

**3) Practice Reading**

Practice reading doesn’t mean reading. Practice reading involves reading faster than you can actually read. Chances are you won’t comprehend much of what you are reading because your brain is so used to going at a slower rate and subvocalizing. The point is simply to see the text faster than you can read so you can untie the habit of sounding the words as you comprehend them.

You can start doing this by taking out a timer or a stop watch and simply viewing as much text in a book as possible in one minute. Use a book you haven’t read before to ensure your brain is actually practicing instead of relying on memory. Mark out where you started and stopped. Count the number of words per line (use a quick average) and then the number of lines you actually read in the book to compute your practice reading rate.

Once you get used to practice reading at a high rate that you can’t comprehend, you should slowly be able to actually comprehend at a slightly slower rate but still faster than if you subvocalized. I would often practice read at between 1500 and 1800 words per minute, and although I lacked comprehension skill, I could maintain it at about 900-1000, over double what I had done when I subvocalized.

But how can you practice read faster than you can read? How do you follow the text but still go faster than you can read? The answer is another of speed reading tricks, using a *pointer*.

**4) Use a Pointer**

Your eyes don’t stay fixed in one spot when reading. Eye tracking movements have shown that your eyes actually quiver and move around considerably. And every movement away from your position in text requires a few milliseconds to readjust. These little readjustments in locating your place in a book add up to be very costly if you want to go faster.

Use your index finger to mark where you are on the page at all times. It should follow along with the word you are currently reading, slowly scrolling across each line and then back down one. It may feel awkward at first and it may even temporarily slow your reading rate as you adjust, but using a pointer is critical if you want to improve your reading skill.

Using a pointer is also crucial if you want to practice read. By moving your finger faster than you can actually read, your eyes get used to viewing text faster than your brain can process what is written down. This will break your subvocalization attachment and can easily let you double your reading rate with sufficient practice.

You should use your finger as a pointer all the time. When I first started with the habit I found it annoying to hold the book in a funny position so I could use my right hand to scroll the page. I thought it was silly and maybe even a waste of time. But now I find it hard to read without a pointer. Noticing how much it has helped me focus my reading efforts it is a priceless tool in reading.

**5) Eliminate Distractions**

As a university student living on campus I’ve noticed a few of my friends who “study” while watching television. Not surprisingly, these tend to be the same people who complain about how much studying they have to do. Reading can’t happen in an environment where external distractions are overwhelming.

If you need a break, take a break. Taking a few minutes to watch a television show, listen to some music or just close your eyes can often improve your focus. But don’t multitask with your reading or you’ll lose any benefits speed reading can offer. Worse, because you have stopped subvocalizing, you might even skim through several pages before you realize you haven’t comprehended anything that was written.

Distractions will hamper regular reading but they will make speed reading impossible. Subvocalization creates enough mental noise that it can hold your attention, but without that it can often be difficult to stick with what you are reading.

External distractions may be a problem, but internal distractions are just as bad. They occur when in the midst of reading you start pondering that conversation you just had with a friend, the movie you want to see or whether you should do your laundry. The way to remove internal distractions comes from clearly identifying a purpose and a motivation.

**6) Find Your Motivation**

If there was one piece of advice I would offer to improve your reading rate it would be simply to engross yourself in the material you are studying. If you can connect what you are reading to a deeply held motivation, and determine your specific purpose for reading you can maintain a very alert and focused state.

Most people don’t do this. Instead they force themselves to study the book they know they should and end up having to refocus themselves every thirty seconds when their mind decides that this book is boring and would like to be somewhere else.

First, find a general motivation. This is how what you are reading relates to your truly motivating goals and passions in life. When I read my psychology textbook I focus on the fact that many personal development principles come from an understanding of human psychology and that I may discover new ideas if I look carefully. When studying ancient Asian history I focused on the fact that studying a completely different culture could offer insights into how Western and Eastern value systems differed, giving me new thoughts on whether my values are as absolute as I once thought. I also focused on the fact that many great philosophers such as Buddha and Confucius lived during these times with a profound influence on the ideas of these nations.

The general motivation should make you want to read the book. If you don’t genuinely want to read the book, come up with more reasons it is attached to your deepest interests or it is going to be a struggle to move through. You can find a general motivation for reading any book if you are creative enough, so don’t tell me you can’t figure out one.

The second portion is to determine your specific motivation for reading. What are you specifically looking for when reading the book. New ideas? A practical solution to a problem? An understanding of a concept? A chance to flex your mental muscles? Figure out what you want to get out of each reading session so your mind is primed to intake that knowledge.

If you are interested in improving your speed reading, I strongly suggest [**Breakthrough Rapid Reading**](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2FBreakthrough-Rapid-Reading-Peter-Kump%2Fdp%2F073520019X%3Fie%3DUTF8%26s%3Dbooks%26qid%3D1174671556%26sr%3D1-1&tag=scottcom-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325)**http://www.assoc-amazon.com/e/ir?t=scottcom-20&l=ur2&o=1** by Peter Kump. The book goes from beginner concepts that I’ve detailed to even more advanced ones that I have yet to master (such as reading several lines at once and reading sentences backwards to save time on a pointer backstroke). Speed reading is definitely a worthwhile skill and at the very least your friends will be impressed.

**Speed Reading Follow-Up**

My [recent lifehacker.com feature](http://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2007/03/21/welcome-lifehackercom-readers/) has created a lot of buzz over my article, [Double Your Reading Rate](http://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2007/03/10/double-your-reading-rate/). But I’m afraid I’ve stirred up a bit of confusion over the idea of subvocalization. Subvocalization is saying the words inside your head as you read them. This is a distinct process from actual comprehension and isn’t strictly necessary for reading. But unfortunately I think I misguided a few people because of the lack of breadth of the article about how to read without subvocalization and what it really is.

First, you can only stop subvocalizing by doing practice reading. Trying to stop now is just going to result in blurred skimming of the material which really isn’t the point. Some of the people after hearing my suggestion tried to stop subvocalizing and missed the rest of the article. Focus on reading when you read, focus on improving speed reading when you practice — you can’t do both at the same time!

The next point is that subvocalization simply means reading every word inside your head. Many people who already read at a high rate (>400 words) already lapse out of subvocalization without realizing it. Once you stop and realize to yourself, “whoops! I’m subvocalizing, better stop…” you’ve already lost your focus and the ability to speed read is gone. Reading is all about focus and internal distractions by *trying* to speed read instead of just reading will screw you up. You should only focus on speed reading during practice sessions where you attempt to practice new techniques and read faster than you can comprehend.

How do you know when you stop subvocalizing. One person in the book Breakthrough Rapid Reading mentioned that she found the key to speed reading. She said to her instructor, “You just have to read only the important words.” The instructor replied, “But how do you know which words are important?” She had actually be interpreting the sentences but she had stop subvocalizing most of the words.

Similarly when you use advanced techniques that involve reading several lines at once or reading words backwards, you may still “hear” the words inside your head as you understand the sentences but when you look at how fast you are actually reading it along with the mechanics of reading, true subvocalization is impossible.

If you continue to hear the words you are reading inside your head, don’t worry about it, that is likely an illusion once you get up to 700-800 words per minute. It would be impossible to actually read every word in your head so the sounds you hear when reading are likely just your brain assembling the information. Subvocalization means hearing every… single… word… sounded out. Considering I have some very astute and skilled readers here you probably already lapse in and out of subvocalization without realizing it.

Subvocalization can be useful. Just like it isn’t always wise to read fast, sometimes it makes sense to subvocalize. My article focused on how to read faster, but sometimes you need to read slower. Better reading comes from having a brake and a gas pedal not just one or the other. If you are having trouble comprehending, slowing down so you start subvocalizing again can eliminate distractions and refocus your mind on the material.

**A Side Note on Pointers**

I mentioned that it is important to use a pointer to reduce eye movements and focus your reading. The book Breakthrough Rapid Reading promotes using your finger to read everything, even subtitles on a movie screen! I’ve found that this is impractical.

I talk about speed reading where it applies most, long books. Short website articles I frequently slow down on because I don’t have the time to get fully engaged and burn through it. If I am reading something like an e-book, sometimes I will use my mouse cursor to focus my eyes, but this requires a little more dexterity than your hand.

I believe it is important when you start out speed reading to always use some form of a pointer. This will make it a habit. After the habit is installed, you may decide certain mediums of writing just aren’t worth using your speed reading habits on. Just as you wouldn’t accelerate to 100 mph to go buy groceries around the corner, certain reading tasks don’t get much benefit from speed reading.

Speed reading is a useful skill, but that is all it is, a skill. It isn’t a new paradigm of reading, just another set of techniques for absorbing information more quickly. After learning this skill I use it where it serves me. Invest the time to practice the skill and you can receive the benefits.

**How to Read 70+ Books in a Year**

Over the past two years I’ve read over 120 books. If you add up partial books I read for specific segments, that number would be well over 140. But only four years ago I would have read 10-12 books per year. Although reading at least seventy books a year sounds difficult, it doesn’t require a huge investment of time.

Here’s how I did it:  
 **Step One: Learn to Speed Read**

Some people see speed reading as a magical technique to ingest thousands of pages per hour. Therefore it tends to divide those people who are mystified by it and those who think it is a complete fraud. I’d like to argue that speed reading is neither. The term “speed reading” itself is a bit off.

The real idea behind speed reading is that you know how (and when) to speed up and when to slow down. With a few basic techniques you can get a sizable increase on your maximum speed. If you want to learn how to speed read start reading here: [Double Your Reading Rate](http://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2007/03/10/double-your-reading-rate/).

Summary tips for speed reading:

1. Use your forefinger to follow the line on the page. This focuses your vision onto a specific part of the text.
2. Practice read textbooks faster than you can comprehend. This isn’t actual reading but it will make you familiar with using your finger and slowly increase your maximum speed.
3. State your purpose before starting to read. This will allow you to focus on information you need and reject information you don’t.

**Step Two: Always Have a Book**

This one may sound obvious, but the best way to increase the amount of books you read is to always have a book. Gaps of a few weeks without any reading material means several less books you can read each year. Worse, time spent without a book breaks down your reading habits so it can be harder to start again.

If always having a book to read sounds to constrictive, maybe you’re reading the wrong article. You need a passion for finding new ideas and learning. Outside pressure won’t help.

**Step Three: One Book at a Time**

I strive to never read more than one book at a time. There are a couple reasons for this:

1. You can’t read two books simultaneously, so having two books partially completed isn’t going to accelerate the amount you are reading.
2. Each book uses up your mental RAM, making it more likely to forget critical details when switching between books.
3. You keep reading a bad book instead of tossing it. Either keep reading a book or get rid of it. Don’t put it on “hold” while you skim through other books.
4. Reading one book keeps you focused.

**Step Four: Fill Gap Time With Reading**

Gap time is the small windows of five to ten minutes you can’t schedule activities in. This could be waiting in line at the dentist, a spare ten minutes hanging on the end of your lunch break or a fifteen minute gap between classes. Reading is the perfect filler for gap time.

Usually I can find a total of twenty to thirty minutes each day just in gap time. With that amount you can read at least forty books a year on gap time alone. That means you could get over three dozen books read annually – without investing extra time.

The only requirement to utilize gap time is that you carry a book with you.

**Step Five: Cut the Television and Web-Surfing**

The next way to grab a bit more reading time is to cut background noise. Background noise is the activities you do when you don’t have anything to do. Usually television or web-surfing, this often means watching programs that have zero entertainment value or rechecking your RSS feeds for the fiftieth time today.

Create the habit of reading whenever you don’t have something planned. Television and internet usage can be great, if you are watching shows you enjoy or making good use of the net. But if the shows aren’t adding anything to your day, turn them off and pick up your book.  
 **Step Six: Keep a To-Read List**

My to-read list is a perpetual Amazon shopping cart filled with books recommended to me. Motivating yourself to read a current book is as simple as having books after it to read. My to-read list motivates me to finish a current book because I’m interested in searching through the one after it.

Keeping a to-read list also takes the effort out of tracking books. I almost never need to go into the bookstore and just browse. Whenever I get a link for an interesting book, I add it to my Amazon shopping cart in advance.  
 **Getting Started**

I don’t need to tell you the benefits of reading books. As a kid you probably saw tacky motivational posters in your school informing you that, “Reading is Power!” The motivation to read seventy books a year needs to come from within. External pressures like getting good grades, pride from considering yourself more academic than your friends or hoping to find that perfect answer at the bottom of a self-help bin aren’t going to cut it.

However if you are curious about implementing these steps and trying to read more books, here are some starting points:

* Go to [**Amazon**](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Famazon.com%2F&tag=scottcom-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325) right now and pick out some books. If your tighter on expenses, go to your library. But you can’t start without several books in your reading stack.
* Get [**Breakthrough Rapid Reading**](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2FBreakthrough-Rapid-Reading-Peter-Kump%2Fdp%2F073520019X%3Fie%3DUTF8%26s%3Dbooks%26qid%3D1174671556%26sr%3D1-1&tag=scottcom-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=9325), to work on your speed reading. Speed reading isn’t a prerequisite to reading this much, but I’ve found the techniques helpful in the same way an athlete might get help from a personal trainer. No magic, but it can install some good reading habits.
* Set a one month reading goal. Try to read 10-30 pages a day just for the next month. Nothing too challenging, but enough to help you install the habits of regular reading.