

The 1,000-Word Dash

College-educated people who fret they read too slow should relax. Nobody reads much faster than 400 words per minute.

By *Timothy Noah*



The *Slate* Reading Test

* Find Out How Fast You Read

* How Do You Measure Up?

* Can You Improve?



Aloysius reads 300 books a year. Bartholomew reads only 30. Both are intelligent college graduates who like to read fiction and general-interest nonfiction; among the magazines they scan regularly are *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly* and, of course, ***Slate***. Aloysius' performance intimidates Bartholomew, making him think that Aloysius reads 10 times faster than he. Bartholomew feels so inadequate that he's spoken about it many times to his psychotherapist.

But Bartholomew has it wrong. Aloysius *doesn't* read 10 times faster, because Aloysius *can't* read 10 times faster. Studies show that people who read at or above the college level *all read at about the same speed when they read for pleasure*.

Within the contentious world of reading theory, there is unanimity on this point. When you factor out the amount of time spent thinking through complex and unfamiliar concepts—a rarity when people read for pleasure—reading is an appallingly mechanical process. You *look* at a word or several words. This is called a "fixation," and it takes about .25 seconds on average. You *move* your eye to the next word or group of words. This is called a "saccade," and it takes up to about .1 seconds on average. After this is repeated once or twice, you *pause to comprehend* the phrase you just looked at. That takes roughly 0.3 to 0.5 seconds on average. Add all these fixations and saccades and comprehension pauses together and you end up with about 95 percent of all college-level readers reading between 200 and 400 words per minute, according to Keith Rayner, a psycholinguist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The majority of these college-level readers reads about 300 words per minute.

What about the far end of the bell curve? Isn't it *possible* there are a handful of super-smart Aloysiuses out there who can read much faster than everybody else? John F. Kennedy was said to read 1,200 words per minute. The speed-reading huckster Evelyn Wood claimed that a professor boasted of consuming more than 2,500 words per minute "with outstanding recall and comprehension." A 1963 study purported to find one person who read 17,040 words per minute. The last two examples are gleaned from a 1985 study in *Reading Research Quarterly*, by Ronald Carver, a professor of education research and psychology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Carver thinks all three of these examples are bunk. JFK, he says, probably read 500-600 words a minute—that's very fast—and perhaps could *skim* 1,000 words per minute. (To learn where the JFK speed-reading story came from, click [here](#).) But skimming isn't reading. Unless you're already familiar with the material skimmed, you're going to miss a lot. (Speed-reading courses teach skimming, not reading, though most won't admit that.) Evelyn Wood's "walking encyclopedia" of a professor was probably a skimmer too, assuming he existed. Carver discounts the 17,040-per-minute reader in the 1963 study because all the times and word counts were self-reported, and the comprehension tests were self-graded.

When Carver set out to find the world's fastest readers and see for himself how quickly they read, he ended up with 16 test subjects—four groupings of four. The first group were the highest scorers on a test Carver administered to a large group of college students. The second group were demonstrably successful at jobs "that required a great deal of reading." (They included a *New Yorker* writer named Fred Shapiro and the editor of a medical journal.) The third group scored "exceptionally well" on standardized reading tests administered by a colleague. The fourth group had "reputations and supporting documentation for being speed readers."



At Carver's direction, the 16 brainiacs read passages from *Reader's Digest* condensed editions under controlled conditions: *None* of them could read faster than 600 words per minute and retain more than 75 percent of the information contained in the texts. From this, Carver concluded that the fastest college-level reader will read, *at best*, *twice* as fast as the slowest college-level reader.

The inescapable conclusion is that Aloysius doesn't read much faster than Bart; he just reads a lot more. Maybe Aloysius has a long subway commute to work, whereas Bartholomew drives. This raises, for Bartholomew, a glimmering hope: Can he catch up by listening to books on tape?

Probably not. Spoken language's elaborate rhythms and inflections convey more meaning per word than the printed word. Compare a radio broadcast of a Shakespeare play to reading it. Word for word, listening will be easier. But readers can flip back and look at something whose meaning they might initially have missed; academics call this "regression." Another advantage to reading is that you can "go off-line and think about what you read," says James M. Royer, another psychology professor at U. Mass. Amherst. The weighing of relative merits gets pretty elaborate, no doubt partly because of academia's multiculti sensitivity to

nonwestern cultures that exalt the oral tradition. Setting political correctness aside, however, it's probably true that if you really want to absorb the multiple meanings, and you're only going to do this once, reading is better.

Books on tape also pose a time problem. Carver found that college-level readers optimally take in and understand spoken words at the same word rate that they take in written words—typically about 300 words per minute. The catch is that not even auctioneers can speak at a rate much beyond 250 words per minute. (To produce a 300-words-per-minute sample, Carter had to use a "time-compressed speech" device that compacts words and deletes fractions of dead air between words.) The 250-word count of an auctioneer is much faster than the 175 words per minute the typical book-on-tape actor manages. Sadly, this means the tape deck in Bartholomew's car affords him little hope of catching up with Aloysius. But Bartholomew can comfort himself by remembering that Aloysius is just one-fifth the speed reader he once feared.

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