

Chapter 1

Of Course You Can Speed Read!

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the act of reading
 - ▶ Examining speed-reading myths
 - ▶ Finding the right spot for successful speed reading
 - ▶ Demonstrating to yourself that you can speed read
-

If you're a typical reader, your reading education ended in the third grade, and you currently read using the same techniques you used as a third grader. You're not reading as fast as you want because no one taught you the skills to read faster.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that everybody can increase their reading speed by adopting a few simple techniques. Beyond those techniques, by being a committed reader, applying speed-reading principles, and reading with more concentration, you can read very quickly — perhaps doubling or even tripling your current reading speed. You can also read with better comprehension and retain and recall what you read. What's more, you can get more pleasure and meaning from the books, articles, and Web pages you read.

This chapter introduces basic speed-reading concepts and demonstrates why anyone can become a speed reader. At the end of the chapter, you can find an exercise that lets you put speed-reading skills to the test and see for yourself just how helpful a few techniques can be.

What Is Speed Reading, Anyway?

When you read the words on the page of a book or newspaper article, what goes on in your head? Do you also hear the words as you read them? If you do, someone is speaking them, and unless a leprechaun is sitting on your shoulder, that someone is you.

Reading engages the eyes, ears, mouth, and, of course, the brain. Speed reading engages these senses even more than normal reading because you use your senses and brain power even more efficiently. The following sections explain in detail what goes on in your eyes, ears, mouth, and brain when you speed read.

Speed reading is seeing

First and foremost, speed reading is seeing; the first step in reading anything is seeing the words. But how do you see words on the page when you read?

Prior to 1920 or so, researchers and educators believed that people read one word at a time. To read, they thought, you moved your eyes left to right across the page, taking in one word after the other. Under this theory, fast readers were people who could identify and recognize the words faster.

However, all but beginning readers have the ability to see and read more than one word at a time. As you move your eyes left to right across the page, you jump ahead in fits and starts, taking in anywhere between one and five words at a time in quick glances.

These quick glances, when your eyes stop moving at different points in a sentence as you read it, are called *eye fixations*. I get into more detail on how eye fixations work in Chapter 3, but for now, the important points to know about speed reading are

- ✔ **You read several words in a single glance.** Unless you're encountering words you don't know or haven't read before, you don't read words one at a time.
- ✔ **You expand your vision so that you can read and understand many words in a single glance.** A very good speed reader can read, see, and process 10 to 14 words in a single eye fixation.
- ✔ **You expand your vision to read vertically as well as horizontally on the page.** As well as taking in more than one word on a line of text, speed readers can also, in a single glance, read and understand words on two or three different lines. Check out Chapter 6 for more on expanding your reading vision, and head to Chapter 15 for some exercises that help you do just that.

Speed reading is silent reading

When you read, do you sometimes hear a faint whispering in your ear that belongs not to you, but to another person? Don't fret, because you aren't alone. Most people hear words when they read. The words speak to them from the page.

When you read, you speak words to yourself because you learned to read with the sound-it-out method. In school, your teacher told you that each letter makes a sound (sometimes more than one sound), that certain letter combinations also make sounds, and that you can always read a word by sounding out the letters and letter combinations:

su-per-cal-i-frag-il-ist-ic-ex-pi-al-i-do-cious

Your teacher was absolutely right. Being able to sound out words is an essential skill for beginning readers. Knowing the sounds each letter makes and knowing what sounds letter combinations make enables you to pronounce and read any word you encounter in your reading.

The problem with the sound-it-out approach to reading is that it slows you down. You read not at the speed you think but rather at the speed you talk. Sounding it out is fine for beginning readers, but at some point you have to dispense with sound if you want to be a speed reader. Saying the words, even if you only whisper them inside the confines of your skull, takes time.

In speed-reading terminology, saying and hearing words as you read them is called *vocalizing* (Chapter 2 gives you the lowdown on vocalizing and how to stop it). For now you need to remember that

- ✓ Vocalizing is a throwback to your early reading education; you must abandon it to be a speed reader.
- ✓ Training yourself not to vocalize when you read is one of the most important speed-reading skills you can acquire.

Speed reading is decoding the words

When you come across a word in your reading that you don't know or recognize, you have to decode it. You break it into syllables, try to pronounce it, and see whether it's related to words you know. You try to get its meaning, and if you can't do that on your own, you consult a dictionary or other reference source.

Beginning readers have to decode most of the words they encounter. But the more you read, the fewer words you have to decode because reading enlarges your vocabulary. It introduces you to more words.

Chapter 12 explains how to enlarge your vocabulary. For now, all you need to know about speed reading is

- ✔ The larger your vocabulary is, the faster you can read, because you don't have to slow down or halt your reading as often to decode words you don't know.
- ✔ If you want to be a speed reader, you have to develop your vocabulary.

Speed reading is comprehending

The purpose of reading is to comprehend — to learn something new, see the world from a different perspective, or maybe just get information to pass an exam or prepare for a business meeting.

How well you comprehend what you read is determined by these factors:

- ✔ **Reading speed:** When you don't read at the right speed, your comprehension is diminished. One of the skills you acquire as a speed reader is knowing when to slow down and when to speed up. The fastest speed readers adjust the speed at which they read, just as the fastest stock car racers slow down when they're in a crowded field or on a slick patch of roadway. They adjust their speed according to the type of reading they're doing.
- ✔ **Breadth of vocabulary:** Having a large vocabulary is a must for speed readers. You can't get away from it.
- ✔ **Degree of familiarity with the subject matter:** How strong a background you have in the topic you're reading about determines how well you comprehend what you read. Obviously, you have a head start if you're traveling in territory you're familiar with and you know the jargon already.

Though many chapters in this book deal with comprehension in some aspect, Part IV (Chapters 12 and 13) deals specifically with improving your comprehension as you speed read. At this point, what you need to know about speed reading is that

- ✔ **Speed reading actually increases reading comprehension.** Because you read several words at a time when you speed read, you can pick up the meaning of words in context. This

ability to read in context improves comprehension because each word in the sentence gives meaning to the other words instead of standing alone.

- ✓ **Speed reading has a snowball effect on the size of your vocabulary and general knowledge, which increases your reading speed.** The more you read, the larger your vocabulary and breadth of knowledge become; the larger they become, the more easily you read, which encourages you to read more and broaden your vocabulary and knowledge.
- ✓ **You can adopt many strategies for improving your comprehension when you read.** For example, you can train yourself to pinpoint the most important parts of an essay and read them more carefully. You can even focus on the most important parts of a sentence as you read them. In Chapter 13, I describe strategies for reading efficiently to complete various kinds of tasks.

Speed reading is concentrating

All reading requires concentration; even reading a third-rate thriller on the beach on a beautiful sunny day requires a certain amount of concentration. If only for a moment, you have to ignore the refreshing breeze, as enticing as it feels, to find out whether the hero will escape from the villain's secret mountaintop retreat.

Speed reading, however, requires sustained, forceful concentration because when you speed read, you do many things at once. As you see and read the words on the page, you also remain alert to the main ideas that the author wants to present. You have to think along with the author and detect how she presents the material so you can pin down the main ideas. As you read, you have to read with more perspective and separate the details from weightier stuff. You have to know when to skim, when to read fast, and when to slow down to get the gist of it. (Chapter 10 helps you choose your reading speed.)

Speed reading also requires you to read aggressively. You read hungrily, absorbing the information as you come to it.



One way to improve your concentration when you speed read is to imagine that nothing exists outside the boundaries of the page you're reading (or the boundaries of the monitor, if you're reading at your computer). Pretend that the entire universe has been condensed to the square space in front of your nose. Nothing can distract you because nothing exists to distract you.

Debunking Speed-Reading Myths

The previous section explains what reading, and speed reading in particular, is. This section explains what speed reading isn't. These myths about speed reading are false:

- ✔ **You don't enjoy reading as much when you speed read.** On the contrary! Speed reading is efficient reading, as I explain in "What Is Speed Reading, Anyway?" earlier in this chapter. When you speed read, you're a better reader — you get more pleasure and meaning out of the books, articles, and Web pages that you read. In my years as a speed-reading teacher, I have seen countless individuals grow to love reading after they learned how to speed read.
- ✔ **You don't comprehend as well when you speed read.** Speed reading is the act of reading with higher levels of concentration. What's more, by reading several words at a time rather than one word after the other, your comprehension increases. You can read words in context and derive more meaning from the words you read. Check out "Speed reading is comprehending" earlier in this chapter for more on why this myth is a sham.
- ✔ **You skip words when you speed read.** Wrong again. Speed readers don't fixate their eyes on all the words as they read, but that doesn't mean they skip the words. Speed reading entails reading words in clumps, or groups. You read more than one word at a time, but no word gets skipped. (Head to Chapter 6 for more on reading word clumps.)
- ✔ **You have to run your finger down the page or use a pacer when you speed read.** A *pacer* is a visual guide, such as your finger or a pen, that marks where you read on the page; I've included three of them on the Cheat Sheet at the front of this book. Most people have a stereotypical image of a speed reader as a crazed-looking individual dragging her finger or a pacer quickly down the page in the act of reading. However, you don't *need* a pacer to speed read. As I explain in Chapter 3, a pacer can be helpful in the early stages of speed reading, but you're wise to abandon it after you get the hang of speed reading.

What You Need to Get Started

Besides the ability to concentrate, you don't need very much to speed read.

If you're reading a book, magazine, newspaper, or the like, you need a quiet, well-lit place free from noise and other distractions. Make wherever you can concentrate best the place you go when you want to speed read.

You may also use a pacer when you read. (Chapter 3 discusses pacers in detail.) A *pacer* is a reading aid such as a card or your hand that directs you where to look on the page when you read. The Cheat Sheet at the front of this book has three pacers in case you want to use one. In the exercises, I sometimes call on you to use a pacer; choose whichever Cheat Sheet pacer is most comfortable for you.

Some of the exercises in this book call for you to time your reading speed. If you have a stopwatch you can use to time yourself, great. If not, you need a clock or watch with a second hand so you can time yourself down to the second.



Don't look at your clock or watch while you do the exercises! You may distract yourself from getting the highest possible score.

You also need a good pair of eyes, and barring that, a good pair of glasses. How's your eyesight? No matter how good or poor it is, flip to Chapter 15 for some eye exercises that improve the health of your eyes and Chapter 16 for more info on the importance of good eye health.



When you speed read, you should be comfortable, but not too comfortable. For example, a hammock isn't a good location for speed reading. Hammocks induce sleep, not higher levels of concentration.

More than ever, people do their reading on computer monitors, not the pages of books, newspapers, or magazines. You can do a handful of things to make computer reading more comfortable and less of a strain on your eyes. Check out Chapter 13 for advice.

Proving You Can Read Faster

In "What Is Speed Reading, Anyway?" earlier in this chapter, I explain both the disadvantages of vocalizing and the benefits of using eye fixations as you read. Exercise 1-1 demonstrates these points. In this exercise, you read a short essay called "The Need to Revise the Nation's Reading Curriculum" twice. You read it first without the benefits of the speed-reading principles I cover in this chapter, and then you put on your speed-reading cap and read the essay again, using basic speed-reading techniques. At the end of the exercise, you compare reading times.

Follow these steps to complete the first half of the exercise:

1. **Take note of the time you start reading.**
2. **Read the following presentation of “The Need to Revise the Nation’s Reading Curriculum” (Practice Text 1-1a) out loud.**

That’s right — say every single word, pronouncing each word carefully and correctly. Speak loud enough to make the dog or cat (if one is in the room) prick up his ears. Reading aloud like this requires you to read one word at a time, which is what happens when you vocalize.

3. **When you finish reading, write down how long it took to read the essay on the worksheet in Appendix B.**

Practice Text 1-1a

The Need to Revise the Nation’s Reading Curriculum by Richard Sutz

Call to action: To revise the nation’s reading curriculum in order to create a more literate society where the potential and productivity of the citizenry is not limited or constrained by ineffective, slow reading. This revision is needed because formal reading education, the learn-to-read stage, officially *stops* after third grade, at which time children have learned:

- *Only* to read one word at a time, out loud — what we call “oral reading fluency.”
- *None* of the necessary read-to-learn skills — what we call “silent reading fluency.”

We propose four revisions to the nation’s reading curriculum that incorporate teaching children the silent reading skills necessary to become effective and efficient readers. To achieve silent reading fluency, children must be taught to see, read, and process groups of words or units of meaning with each eye fixation, without vocalizing (lip or subliminally).

1. REVISE the No Child Left Behind Act goals to redefine oral reading fluency as the *interim goal*, and incorporate silent reading fluency as the *new end-goal*.
2. TRAIN educators to teach silent reading skills to children before, during, and after third grade.

Practice Text 1-1a (*continued*)

3. REQUIRE mastery of prime words (approximately 75 percent of all words found in print). This will dramatically facilitate reading groups of words automatically, with improved comprehension, while reading silently.
4. ASSESS reading improvement in standardized testing related to the teaching of silent reading skills.

These revisions will *guarantee* successful teaching, learning, and mastery of silent reading skills — skills that are required in today's information-based society where all reading is silent and individuals are judged on their ability to read to learn.

About USA's Current Reading Curriculum — The Good Side: No Child Left Behind set a standard and timeline by which all of the nation's children will demonstrate that they have learned to read by the end of third grade. The benefits of early reading education are indisputable. Children who are literate (who can read and enjoy reading) are better equipped to avoid drugs, teen suicide, and dropping out of high school, and 90 percent of learning is based on reading. Children who cannot read by the end of third grade are far more likely to be school dropouts, experience teen-age pregnancy, rely on state social services as adults, and be forced into low-skill, low-wage jobs throughout their lives.

About USA's Current Reading Curriculum — The Bad Side: Children are not explicitly taught effective and efficient fluent silent reading skills. Why? Because formal reading education stops *immediately* after oral reading skills are mastered. Hence, fourth graders, armed only with oral reading skills (the exact opposite of silent reading skills) enter the silent reading world unprepared to read to learn. They are condemned to become slow readers. As a result:

- Students in the fourth grade will continue to experience the well-known “fourth grade slump” — universally understood to be caused by poor reading skills.
- Poor readers in elementary school will continue to become poorer readers in high school and enter adulthood lacking minimal levels of reading skills necessary to achieve successful lives and careers.
- Our nation will continue to create poor readers with all the negative issues associated with a citizenry unable to read efficiently. (Arizona and other states utilize fourth grade reading assessment results as one basis for long-term projections of how many prison beds will be required.)

(*continued*)

Practice Text 1-1a (continued)

Why Does Formal Reading Education Stop after Third Grade?

Because the “end goal” of the current reading curriculum, per No Child Left Behind, is to have children read at the third grade level by the end of third grade, producing children who are only skilled as fluent oral readers. Federal funding supporting reading-to-learn education is *drastically* reduced after third grade; hence, silent reading skills are not taught.

The Solution: Oral reading fluency should be redefined as the No Child Left Behind Act’s interim-goal of reading education. The Act’s end-goal should now be defined as requiring students to demonstrate mastery of silent reading skills — seeing, reading, and processing more than one word at a time without vocalizing (lip or subliminally).

Technology to Accomplish the Solution: Our company utilizes scientifically sound principles to dramatically teach how to unlearn the habits of slow readers (oral readers) and learn the habits and skills used by fluent readers (silent readers). Mastering silent reading skills arms children, as well as adults, with skills needed in the real world, where all reading is done silently.

How Long Does It Take to Learn Silent Reading Skills? Our company guarantees that individuals of any age can double their reading speed with increased comprehension and recall by spending a minimum of 15 minutes every other day for three weeks with our software. Greater improvement will come with additional practice.

When you read the selection a second time, take to heart these speed-reading basics:

- ✓ **Read aggressively.** Part of being a speed reader is reading with more intensity, focus, and concentration. This time, devour the words as you read them. Be an active, not a passive, reader.
- ✓ **Don’t vocalize.** As best you can, glance at the words and take in their meaning without hearing them. (Chapter 2 offers techniques to keep from vocalizing.)
- ✓ **Widen your vision.** Instead of focusing on a word at a time, focus on four, seven, or ten words. Trust yourself to be able to see the most relevant words at a glance and fill in the rest.

Follow these steps to complete the second half of Exercise 1-1:

1. **Take note of the time you start reading the second presentation of “The Need to Revise the Nation’s Reading Curriculum” (Practice Text 1-1b).**

- 2. Read the following presentation of the essay silently; try to resist the urge to vocalize.**

Notice how this second presentation is divided into one- to five-word clumps. You're now reading the essay as a speed reader would read it. You aren't vocalizing, and you're reading several words at a time. Notice how much faster you read.

- 3. When you finish reading the second presentation of the essay, write down how long you took to read it in Appendix B and compare your first reading time to your second reading time.**

Practice Text 1-1b

The Need to Revise the Nation's Reading Curriculum

Call to action:

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We propose four revisions

to the nation's

reading curriculum

that incorporate

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the silent reading skills

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To achieve

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(continued)

Practice Text 1-1b (continued)

units of meaning	of silent reading skills —
with each eye fixation,	skills that are required
without vocalizing	in today's
(lip or subliminally).	information-based society
1. REVISE the	where all reading
No Child Left Behind Act goals	is silent and
to redefine oral reading fluency	individuals are judged
as the <i>interim goal</i> ,	on their ability to read to learn.
and incorporate	<u>About USA's</u>
silent reading fluency	<u>Current Reading Curriculum —</u>
as the <i>new end-goal</i> .	<u>The Good Side:</u>
2. TRAIN educators	No Child Left Behind set
to teach silent reading skills	a standard and timeline
to children	by which all of
before, during, and after	the nation's children
third grade.	will demonstrate that
3. REQUIRE mastery	they have learned to read
of prime words	by the end of third grade.
(approximately 75 percent	The benefits of
of all words found in print).	early reading education
This will dramatically	are indisputable.
facilitate reading	Children who are literate
groups of words automatically,	(who can read and enjoy reading)
with improved comprehension,	are better equipped to
while reading silently.	avoid drugs, teen suicide, and
4. ASSESS reading improvement	dropping out of high school,
in standardized testing	and 90 percent of learning
related to the teaching	is based on reading.
of silent reading skills.	Children who cannot read
These revisions	by the end of third grade
will <i>guarantee</i> successful	are far more likely
teaching, learning, and mastery	to be school dropouts,

Practice Text 1-1b (*continued*)

experience teenage pregnancy,
 rely on state social services
 as adults,
 and be forced into
 low-skill, low-wage jobs
 throughout their lives.

About USA's

Current Reading Curriculum —

The Bad Side:

Children are not explicitly
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 Why? Because
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 Hence, fourth graders,
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- Poor readers
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 and enter adulthood
 lacking minimal levels of
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(*continued*)

Practice Text 1-1b (*continued*)

producing children	scientifically sound principles to
who are only skilled	dramatically teach
as fluent oral readers.	how to unlearn the habits
Federal funding supporting	of slow readers (oral readers)
reading-to-learn education	and learn the habits and skills
is <i>drastically</i> reduced	used by fluent readers
after third grade; hence,	(silent readers).
silent reading skills	Mastering silent reading skills
are not taught.	arms children,
<u>The Solution:</u>	as well as adults,
Oral reading fluency	with skills needed
should be redefined	in the real world,
as the No Child Left Behind Act’s	where all reading is done silently.
interim-goal of reading education.	<u>How Long Does It Take</u>
The Act’s end-goal	<u>to Learn Silent Reading Skills?</u>
should now be defined	Our company guarantees
as requiring students t	that individuals of any age
o demonstrate mastery	can double their reading speed
of silent reading skills —	with increased comprehension
seeing, reading, and processing	and recall
more than one word at a time	by spending a minimum of 15 minutes
without vocalizing	every other day
(lip or subliminally).	for three weeks
<u>Technology to</u>	with our software.
<u>Accomplish the Solution:</u>	Greater improvement will
Our company utilizes	come with additional practice.

If I was a betting man, I’d bet the farm that you read the second presentation faster than the first. Just by reading more aggressively, being careful not to vocalize, and seeing more than one word at a time, you can be a much better reader. The rest of this book gives you many strategies for reading faster, but it all boils down to aggressiveness, silent reading, and better vision.