

# ***READING SKILLS***

## ***Improving Speed and Comprehension***

**THIRD EDITION**

**WILLIAM D. BAKER**



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*Wright State University  
Dayton, Ohio*



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# Preface to the Third Edition

Almost a half-million copies of *Reading Skills* have been sold since the first edition was published in 1953. Since very few textbooks of any kind published in the early fifties are still around today, why does this book endure? I suspect that it keeps bubbling along because it works and because its methods are timeless.

And still the demand for the book continues. And why not? Staying on top of expanding knowledge and an avalanche of information is a challenge. Although *Reading Skills* does not guarantee success, it will point the way.

How many books do you read each year? Would you like to read more books and get more out of them? If so, you have come to the right place.

How rapidly are you reading now? Fifty words a minute? Three hundred? Five hundred? If you are not sure, time yourself on one of the measured chapter readings, using the Time-Rate Table at the back of the book to find your rate. If you practice conscientiously and follow the suggestions in the remaining chapters, there is nothing to stop you from reading anything twice as fast as you do now. Faster reading will give you more pleasure, more knowledge, and a richer life.

For more than three decades people have been able to double their rate of reading by working through this book. You can do it too, and when you do, you will reap the benefits for the rest of your days.

In the third edition I have deliberately shunned such utilitarian selections as "How to Bake a Meringue Pie," assuming that good reading ranges far beyond formulas and lists. Indeed, if a text such as this can be said to have a tone that distinguishes it from others, one could call the tone here humanistic. An indication of that tone is shown by the authors chosen to illustrate (or demonstrate) points in the text: Sherwood Anderson, Aristotle, Sir Francis Bacon, Pearl Buck, Thomas Carlyle, Willa Cather, Kate Chopin, Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson.

son, John Donne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Flexner, Benjamin Franklin, Sigmund Freud, Edith Hamilton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, Homer, Aldous Huxley, Henrik Ibsen, Henry James, William James, Sinclair Lewis, Abraham Lincoln, John Locke, James Russell Lowell, Herman Melville, Arthur Miller, John Milton, Toni Morrison, Michel Montaigne, Flannery O'Connor, Tillie Olsen, George Orwell, Plato, Edgar Allan Poe, Katherine Anne Porter, Marcel Proust, John Ruskin, Helen Santmyer, J. D. Salinger, William Saroyan, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Gertrude Stein, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Mark Twain, Alice Walker, H.G. Wells, Eudora Welty, Edith Wharton, Thomas Wolfe, Virginia Woolf, and Richard Wright.

For the most part this is an eclectic book, one that culls what seem to me the best ideas and reading techniques from a large number of reading manuals and books on reading. I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to authors who have trod this ground before me. I also am under obligation to those who have used the book and have offered constructive criticism.

I wish to thank the following for permission to reproduce material in this book: Harper & Brothers for the extract from Abraham Flexner, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge," Harper's Magazine, used by permission of Harper & Brothers; the American Library Association for the Library Bill of Rights; and the *American Heritage Dictionary*.

*William D. Baker*

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# *How to Use Reading Skills*

Chapters 1 through 16 of this book offer information on how to increase your reading efficiency. In conducting reading services and college English classes, I have found that almost everyone who has read this has achieved a reading rate of 400 words per minute or better. The average reader starts at about 270 and finishes at about 525 words per minute. One woman read the last chapter at 2400 words per minute and had excellent comprehension of the material.

I should like to emphasize here that extremely rapid rates are possible only for relatively easy material, for which this book was deliberately designed. Although I have written with average readers in mind, I have reduced to a minimum the factors (high-powered vocabulary and long and involved sentence structure) that make reading difficult. If you hope to make the track team, it is best to increase your running efficiency on smooth, level ground. Similarly, it is best to increase your reading efficiency on material of standard, or a little below standard, difficulty—the level, say, of popular magazines. Occasionally the application exercises include passages of a higher level of difficulty, to emphasize the importance of reading different levels of material in different ways. Not everything *can* be read at the same rate of speed and not everything in this book *should* be read at the same rate of speed. However, you should apply what you know about reading skills to even the most difficult materials.

Chapters 17 to 24 deal with important reading skills that are often neglected. In developmental reading programs it is not unusual for the work to stop with a consideration of the basic reading skills discussed in the first sixteen chapters. This is unfortunate, because these basic skills, important as they are, are just the beginning. You should advance beyond the utilitarian, textbook type of reading into the excitement of literature and other reading for enjoyment. The early chapters suggest means of chewing and digesting your everyday reading on the job or in the classroom, while the later ones are concerned with improving your literary appetite and developing a taste for good reading.

## **When All Else Fails, Read the Directions**

An important feature of this book is that each chapter can be read for two purposes: *to learn how to become a better reader* and *to develop speed*. To get the most out of this book, you should try to read one chapter a day or, at the very least, three a week, as fast as you can. Application



Exercises—revised in the third edition—enable you to practice the principles of skillful reading that each chapter sets forth. In addition, you will find questions that test your comprehension of what you have just read in the chapter-by-chapter Comprehension Checks beginning on page 110. The answers are provided on page 136 so you can immediately check your accuracy of understanding.

Here is the way to use each chapter: *Begin timing your reading directly after the chapter title*, reading as fast as you can. Do not forget that comprehension is just as important as speed.

When you finish the selection, record the length of time it has taken in minutes and seconds. Use the Time-Rate Table (on page 138) to convert this time into your reading rate for that selection. Record your rate in the space provided at the end of the selection. For example, if you take five minutes to read Chapter 1, a check in the rate table will show your reading rate to be 250 words per minute.

Immediately after recording your rate for each selection, you should turn to the Comprehension Check for that chapter in the last part of the book and answer the questions carefully—without looking back over the chapter. You should always answer a good percentage correctly, and if you miss more than three, you should not count your rate score for that day.

Record your rate and comprehension scores on the Graph of Progress at the back of the book. When you have done so, begin work on the Application Exercise for that chapter. In order to make the book more useful to you, you should work on these various materials such as practice exercises, recall devices, vocabulary quizzes, and suggestions for further study that have been placed after each chapter. Their purpose is to allow you to apply what you learned to a practical reading situation. Most of them allow careful and unhurried reading and call for you to read with pencil in hand. Answer keys, when needed, appear at the end of the chapter or on a specified page.

A careful working of the application exercises and vocabulary checks will help improve your reading rate even though they are usually untimed exercises. Why? The more seriously you attack *all* aspects of your reading, the more effort you will automatically give to improving your rate. In other words, your rate increases in proportion to the effort you make to increase it. It's as simple as that.

# *1 Keeping Up with the Stream*

Events stream past our minds like jet streams, and if we want to be well informed we need to do more than stand and gawk at the vapor scratches in the sky after the jet has passed. We need to be there when it happens. Significant social, economic, and political issues, all demanding serious and open-minded investigation, more than ever before require a high level of reader enlightenment.

To advance in knowledge one must forever learn more, study more, reason more. Reading helps accomplish this; in college about 85 percent of all study involves reading—especially in a computer age. If, as it certainly does, progress comes through study, then reading is the chief means to academic progress.

Since reading is so vitally significant, all of us need to take a close look at our reading habits. The ability to read and the ability to choose good reading material characterize people just as much as do their appearance and speech. Our reading habits are as much a part of us as our ability to hold our own in a discussion or our ability to judge the difference between people. The way we read is closely connected with the way we think.

Check your reading habits by searching your mind for the answers to these questions: Do you read as well as you can? When you read fast, do you understand what you read? Are your reading habits based on sound principles? Do you know what sound principles of reading are? Can you read to make judgments about the relationship between a presentation of the facts and the truth? Are you skillful at determining the meaning of words as they appear in context? Are you an efficient reader?

What are efficient readers? They are people who can race through an ordinary novel very rapidly. Their eyes move quickly over the lines of print, and their accuracy of comprehension is high. They grasp what they read, and they retain for a long period what they have read. They know that it is important to read different materials differently. They first skim a book that they intend to read thoroughly. They always read for a purpose, whether that purpose be sheer pleasure, information, or a combination of the two. They take notes, mental or otherwise, on technical information or on difficult material. And of utmost importance, they concentrate intensively when they read. Reading brings to them some of their keenest pleasures in life; they experience a real satisfaction in doing a thing well. The more they read the better readers they become, because in practicing correct habits, they become more skillful readers.

You probably believe that it is possible to read faster than you do now, but there is probably also a persistent doubt in the back of your mind that your understanding will keep pace. Get rid of that doubt, for it is that doubt rather than anything in the reading process itself that is slowing you down. You will understand just as much and in many cases more when you begin to read more rapidly. When you read rapidly, you will focus on whole thoughts and whole phrases instead of plodding along word by word at a snail's pace. Word-by-word reading yields little meaning; it is only when words are understood in relation to the other words in the phrase or sentence that they make sense. When you understand and accept this fact, you have taken one of the first important steps toward becoming a more efficient reader.

There are specific skills you must develop and practice to become more efficient. You should, for example, always seek to identify the main idea of whatever material you are reading. To illustrate: The main idea of this chapter is skillful reading, so you should remember the idea every time you start a new paragraph. You should say to yourself, "What does this paragraph say about skillful reading? What new information will be offered here? And how will this paragraph be related to the preceding one?" As you read along, you should observe and remember the important details and relate them to the main idea or to significant subordinate ideas. Further, you should also begin drawing a conclusion on the basis of the facts you read. Check to see what the facts are actually pointing out and whether these facts make sense to you. To do this, of course, you need to understand whether authors are explaining or are "secretly" persuading you to accept their point of view. Finally, you should relate what you have read to what you already know about the subject or to what you know about related subjects. If you do not relate what you read to the background of knowledge you now possess, you are reading in a vacuum.

Skillful reading is really an art in the sense that the more diligently you practice, the more proficient you will become.

After finishing the elementary grades, most of us never again have a formal reading lesson. Yet the ability to learn, an obviously important aspect of developing reading skill, increases with maturity. The fact, therefore, that you are now a slow reader does not mean that you must remain one. If you possess a strong and determined will to do so, *you can improve*. If you are now a good reader, you can become a better reader.

There is no royal road to skillful reading. But there are no insurmountable obstacles to it either. The relationship between your belief that you can improve and the actual improvement you make is very close. Success comes to believers.

Begin immediately. Read through each chapter in this book as fast as you can. Don't make the mistake of sacrificing meaning, however, just to get a faster reading rate. No matter what you're reading, comprehen-

sion is more important than speed. Yet you want to try to overcome slow habits as soon as you can. To do that, you have to settle down to try hard. Make a strong effort from the very beginning to read more rapidly and more skillfully.

Record your rate here: \_\_\_\_\_

Average rate for Chapter 1: 270 wpm. Turn to the Comprehension Check on page 110.

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## Application Exercise: Chapter 1

### Get the Idea?

To apply what was stressed in Chapter 1, locate the main idea of the following paragraphs.

(Note: Getting the idea depends on understanding the vocabulary. Certain words are underlined in the following exercises; these words will appear in a vocabulary check on page 20.)

### New Art Forms

Since World War II, various art forms have been altering and expanding our consciousness of what is; at the same time they are expanding the dimensions of art itself. If we consider the theater of the absurd, for example, we see conventional realism rejected as well as linear sequence. We see reality pictured as an illusion; we see that for the creators of this art, none of the old conventions exist. Thus, many of the practitioners of fiction feel that the true enemies of story form are the very things that made us understand the conventions of story form in the beginning: plot, characters, setting, and theme. So say the innovators, while we, as readers, are hanging on by our fingernails.

Write *B* in front of the statement if it is too broad an expression of the main idea; write *N* in front of the statement if it is too narrow an expression of the main idea; write *X* in front of the statement if it is a correct expression of the main idea.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Innovation in art often shows disrespect for old forms.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Innovators, using new forms and discarding the old, expand the public consciousness but may also confuse the public.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Without innovation art cannot be vital and in tune with the times.

### Thoreau Asks for the Best Readers (*Walden*, 1854)

The best books are not read even by those who are called good readers. What does our Concord culture amount to? There is in this town, with very few exceptions, no taste for the best or for very good books even in English literature, whose words all can read and spell. Even the college-bred and so called liberally educated men here and elsewhere have really little or no acquaintance with the English classics; and as for the recorded wisdom of mankind, the ancient classics and

Bibles, which are accessible to all who will know of them, there are the feeblest efforts any where made to become acquainted with them.

Write *B* in front of the statement if it is too broad, *N* if it is too narrow, and *X* if it is a correct expression of the main idea.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Even college-bred people make feeble efforts to read the best books.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The rest of the country, like Concord, should read more good books.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The Bible and ancient and English classics should be read by all.

### Thoreau and Uncommon Schools (*Walden*, 1854)

We boast that we belong to the nineteenth century and are making the most rapid strides of any nation. But consider how little this village does for its own culture. I do not wish to flatter my townsmen, nor to be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us. We need to be provoked—goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot. We have a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only; but excepting the half-starved [lecture hall] in the winter, and latterly the puny beginning of a library suggested by the state, no school for ourselves. We spend more on almost any article of bodily . . . ailment than on our mental [ailment.] It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women.

Write *B* in front of the statement if it is too broad, *N* if it is too narrow, and *X* if it is a correct expression of the main idea.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. We spend more on medicine for our bodies than for our minds.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. We should not boast about our culture but try to improve it by developing uncommon schools for men and women.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. People should not stop learning after they leave common schools.

(1) N,X,B; (2) X,B,N; (3) N,X,B

# 2

## *Figuring Out Your Rate*

Suppose when you went to the doctor with an irritating twinge in your right thigh, you were not examined but only given an aspirin and sent away. You would think, I am sure, that the doctor was very unprofessional, a person you would distrust for not taking the time to make a careful and thorough diagnosis. You would think the doctor a faker for treating you without giving thought to the proper cure.

Before you begin a reading program for yourself, you should make a careful survey of your reading habits. Analyze yourself by using a guide like the checklist at the end of this chapter or, better yet, by consulting a reading specialist. Only after such an analysis will you or anyone else know what to do to make you a better reader.

It is difficult to say what aspect of your reading habits you should consider first, because these habits are conditioned by your eyesight and general health, by your mental quickness, and by personality factors affecting your attitude. For example, your vision is important. If you have not recently had your eyes checked professionally, you should do so before you begin an intensive reading program. Such a program should not cause undue strain on your eyes, and if it teaches you to use your eyes more efficiently, it should in fact lessen the strain on them. Your reading can be seriously hampered, however, if you attempt to do a considerable amount of reading with faulty vision.

Perhaps, as speed is the particular reading skill that most people want above all others, you should first test your speed of reading. Use the chapters of this book to do this. Each chapter is 1000 words long, give or take a few words. Simply divide into 1000 the number of minutes it takes you to read each chapter. The result will be your reading speed in words per minute. The time-rate table in the back of the book does all the arithmetic for you.

What is the meaning of your rate as you work it out? If you are reading under 200 words per minute, the chances are that you are a word-by-word reader. You may find your lips moving, which means that you can read no faster than you can make your lips move. You will be harnessed to the speed of your lips until you can break that habit. If you thrust a pencil between your teeth or stick a knuckle in your mouth, you will find it almost impossible to lip-read.

If you read between 200 and 250 words per minute, you probably vocalize when you read. That is, you form each word in your throat as

you see it on the printed page. This is also a very bad habit because it harnesses you to a slow speed. To discover whether or not you vocalize, place your fingertips on your throat in an attempt to feel vibrations as you read. Reading faster will control if not eliminate vocalizing.

Suppose you are reading at 300 words per minute or faster. That means you are a little faster than an average reader, but it doesn't mean this program is not for you. It probably means you will be able to improve your rate of reading even more than the average person.

Having surveyed your speed of reading, you must check other important aspects of your reading ability. One of these is vocabulary. Have you stumbled on some of the words of this chapter or not? A great deal of one's reading difficulty may be due to a limited vocabulary, which is something you can easily improve by persistent drill, discipline, and practice. When you puzzle out the meaning of a word, you obviously slow to a crawl. Perhaps knowing the meaning of words is not your difficulty. It may be that your "word attack" is not as good as it might be. Word attack refers to your ability to recognize the form of a word and its pronunciation. Many people, once they recognize a word, either know or can puzzle out its meaning. Their difficulty usually comes in recognition. If they knew how to attack the word, if they knew how to pronounce it, they would recognize it immediately and have no trouble with it. Learning how to pronounce words by learning vowel sounds, combined vowel sounds, and consonant-vowel sounds may be what you need to improve your reading efficiency.

Check your comprehension too. Read an article from a magazine you are familiar with, perhaps a hobby magazine, and then make a brief summary of it. Then bring up the subject matter in conversation with a friend, making an attempt to reveal more than a superficial knowledge of dates or statistics. Reveal, if you can, the implications of the statistics or the significance of the dates. Your object is to test your own understanding.

Comprehension is a process of organizing and memory, but it is more than mere recall; a grade-school pupil who has memorized Lincoln's Gettysburg Address may have very little conception of its meaning. Comprehension means understanding, and understanding *can* be improved, for it is not an inborn quality.

Good comprehension depends for the most part on your alertness and your ability to concentrate. If you can concentrate well, you can comprehend well, but if you are a daydreamer, reading will merely be an eye exercise for you.

Reading tests developed by universities and educational agencies have been given to thousands of students to determine their reliability and validity. These tests survey your speed of reading, your accuracy and



level of comprehension, and your vocabulary. You can make a better diagnosis of your ability if you take a test like one of these instead of depending on your own estimate.

Finally, remember that you cannot improve your reading merely by wishing or by daydreaming. The first thing to do is to discover your reading weaknesses. Then make an intelligent effort to improve your reading habits. You are engaging on a self-improvement program that will make you a more skillful reader—if *you work at it*.