Speed Reading

Robert L. Zorn

SPEED READING

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To my wife, Joan

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How Do You Compare?

So you want to learn to speed read! Speed reading is not difficult. It's actually easy. Anyone can improve his or her reading abilities. To do so simply takes motivation and some time and practice. The secret is knowing how and what to practice. That is what this book is all about. It presents the basic steps to faster and better reading. These procedures have worked each year for thousands of people who easily doubled or tripled their reading speed in classes I taught at various schools, colleges, and universities. The methods presented here are the very same successful techniques that have worked for many people for many years.

One of the first questions most people have when becoming involved in the art of speed reading is: *"How does my present reading speed compare to that of others?"*

To answer this question, you need to know two things at the outset: your reading speed and your comprehension. Since these are the two major facets of the entire reading process, determining your normal reading rate and your average comprehension is an ideal starting point on the road to better, more enjoyable reading. You can use this information as a basis for comparison and, more important, a basis for improvement.

In order to ascertain your reading rate and comprehension, simply read the following paragraph and time how long it takes you to read the entire paragraph. It is important that you read this in a comfortable manner which reflects your average or normal rate. Do not try to go excessively fast or slow. A stopwatch would be ideal to time your reading, but any clock or watch that enables you to keep track of the seconds will do fine. Just record *in seconds* how long it takes you to read this one paragraph.

All set? Begin.

READING #1

OUR UNTAPPED READING POTENTIAL

Very few people make full use of the abilities they have as far as reading is concerned. Figures from research indicate that we use only fifteen percent of our available mental resources when we are engaged in recognizing symbols, recalling their meanings, and then assembling those meanings into some resemblance of what the writer had in mind. We would take our car to the nearest garage at once if it were working on only two of its eight cylinders. Yet we don't give our reading abilities the same consideration. Once our reading skill is properly developed, it needs only consistent and proper use to keep it in the very best condition.

How many seconds did it take you? Record your time for this first reading on the Progress Chart in the back of the book (page 143), beside Reading #1, under the heading "SECONDS." This chart will enable you to keep an accurate record of your progress.

Now then, we'll see how well you understood what you read in Reading #1 when you answer the questions in the

following comprehension quiz. Don't refer back to the paragraph. If you don't know the answer or can't remember, just take a guess. There's no penalty for guessing on these questions. Remember, the idea here is simply to find some basic indication of your comprehension skills.

Place your answers on the line provided after each statement. Use the following symbols for your answers: True (T), False (F), or Not Mentioned (N). The tricky part here is the (N) for Not Mentioned. It forces the reader to remember if the topic or point in question was specifically mentioned in the paragraph. It also reduces the guessing factor that would occur in a true-false quiz where the student has a fifty-fifty chance of guessing the right answer. The insertion of *"Not Mentioned"* thus enables you to have a more accurate idea of what your comprehension level really is. Let's try this comprehension quiz.

1. Few people make full use of their ability when they read. _____
2. The task of recognizing symbols and recalling meanings takes much energy. _____
3. We spend more money on our cars than we spend on our reading skills. _____
4. We should take better care of our reading skills. _____
5. Reading skill, like a car, needs to be overhauled at regular intervals. _____

Now let's analyze the results of your reading efforts so we can gain a quick profile, or overview, of your reading skills in both speed and comprehension. First, we convert the seconds it took you to read that paragraph into words per minute (WPM) by using the following chart. This process will give us your actual reading rate, or speed.

Time/Sec.	10	12	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	60
WPM	780	590	472	354	283	236	202	177	157	141	118

If the number of seconds it took you to read the paragraph isn't shown on the chart above, divide into 7080 the number of seconds it did take you to read the paragraph. This will give us your exact WPM. Next, place your WPM score for Reading #1 in the column headed "WPM" on the Progress Chart on page 143.

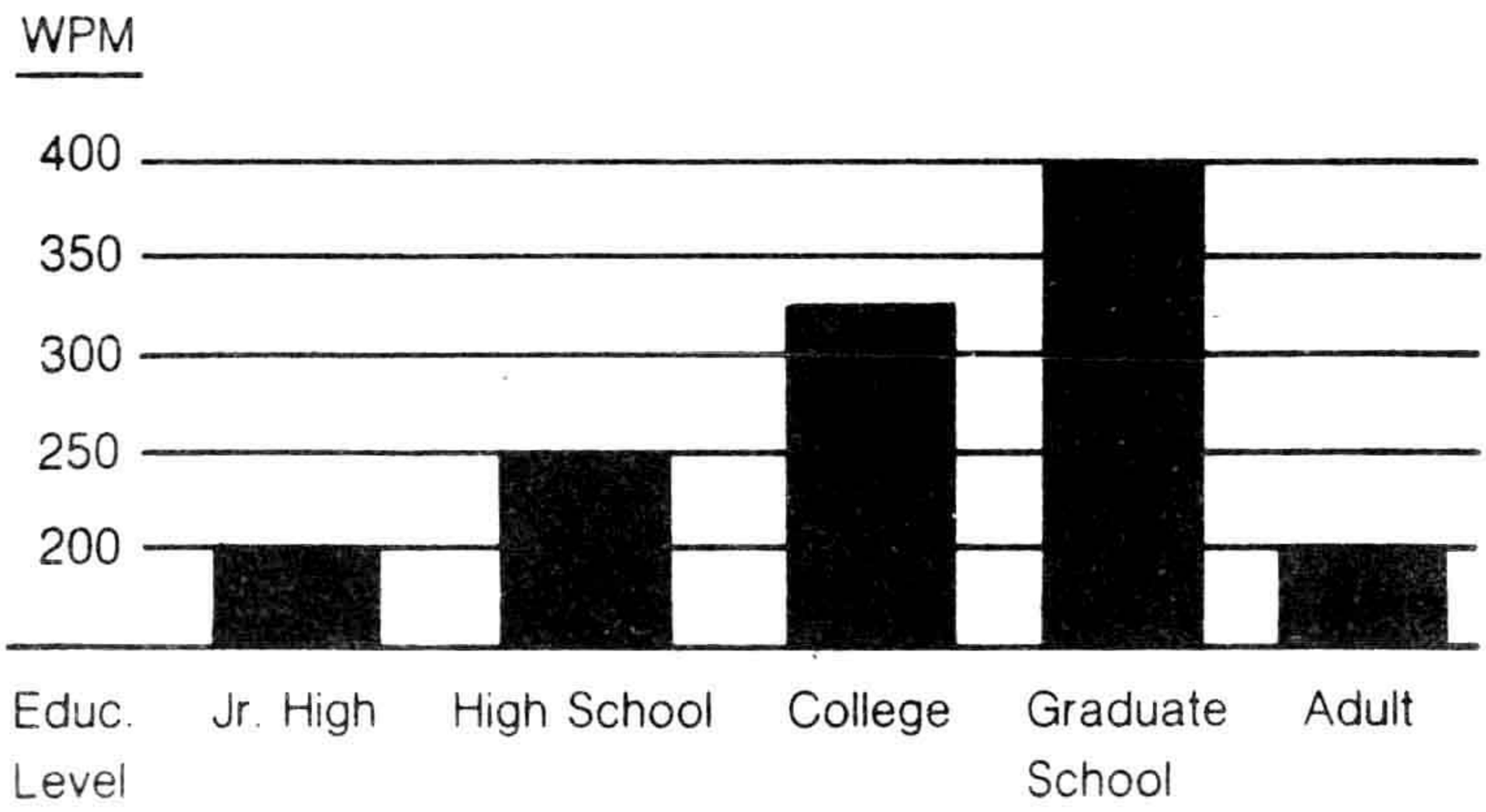
To find your comprehension score, refer to "Answers to Reading Exercises," beginning on page 145.

Give yourself 20 points for each right answer on this comprehension quiz and record your score for Reading #1 in the "COMPREHENSION" column on the Progress Chart (page 143).

Your score is a percentage of accuracy which indicates your comprehension level. You have now completed the following: you read the first exercise and timed how long it took in seconds; you found your WPM; you took a quiz and discovered your comprehension level. The steps you've just completed are the hardest ones outlined in this book. From here on, everything gets easier and easier.

The next thing to do is to compare the results of your speed and comprehension scores on this first reading to those achieved on the same material by people of similar educational levels (see chart on page 5). The average adult usually reads this same paragraph at the rate of approximately 200 WPM. The average high-school student reads it at the rate of about 250 WPM, the average college student at about 325 WPM. A student in graduate school would read it at about 400 WPM.

One statistic shown on the chart opposite may surprise you: the average reading rate for adults.



The reason most adults read at 200 WPM, even if they are college graduates, is quite simple: the amount of reading they do (once they leave school) is not anywhere near the volume they read when they were students. Therefore, their reading speed has gradually tapered off and leveled out to a rate of 200 WPM.

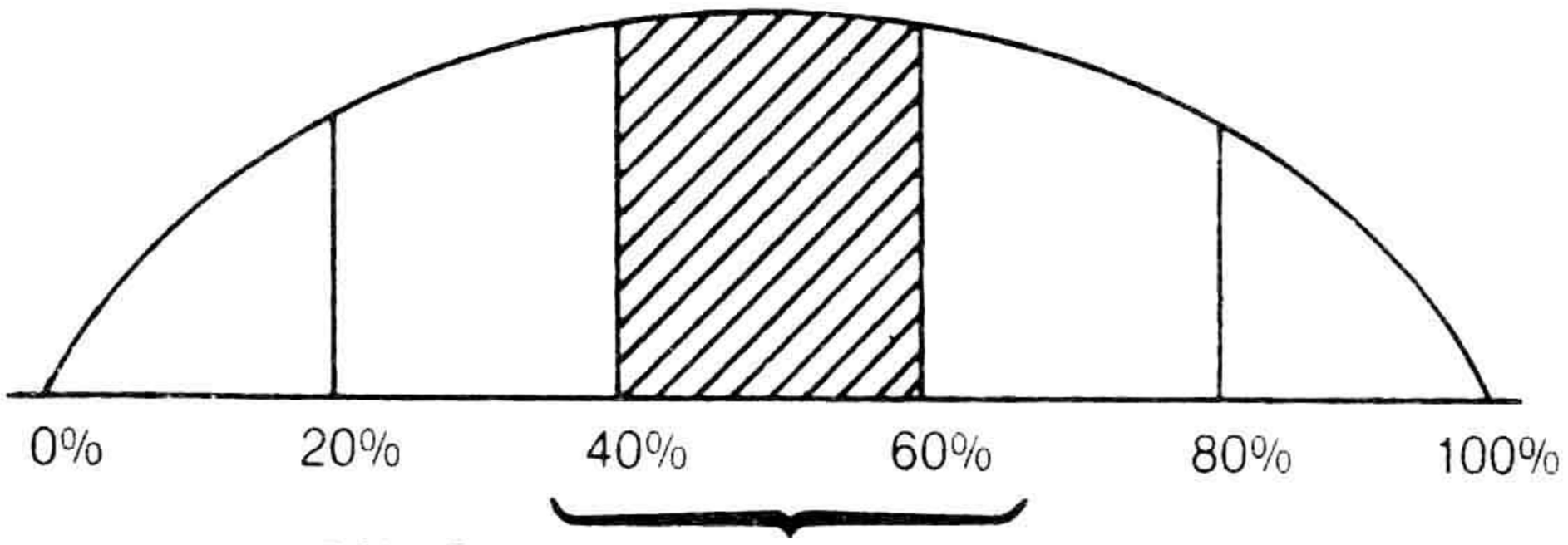
It is also important to note at this point that an individual's reading speed does vary somewhat, about 25 WPM plus or minus the base reading rate shown on the chart. So you can add or subtract 25 WPM from your score and then see what it does to your reading rate in comparison with the norm shown on the chart.

Keep these figures in mind as you set a goal for yourself. How fast do you wish to read? You should be able to *double* or *triple* your reading rate, at the same time maintaining or improving your comprehension.

We're now ready to examine the second major facet of reading—comprehension. It should be noted that the average person usually comprehends only about 50 percent of

what he or she reads. In other words, we could make the following general statements: *The average adult reads 200 WPM and comprehends about 50 percent of what he/she is reading. The average college student reads 325 WPM and comprehends approximately 50 percent. The average high-school student reads about 250 words per minute with 50 percent comprehension.*

The normal curve can be used to illustrate how most people compare in comprehension:



50% Comprehension (Most People)

By now you should have a good understanding of your reading abilities in both speed and comprehension. You should also have a good idea of how you compare to others. You can significantly improve both of these skills if you want to. You can become whatever kind of reader you want to be. It is not uncommon to see high-school pupils, college students, and adults increase their reading rate by 50 or 100 percent in a relatively short time, while at the same time maintaining or even increasing their comprehension!

It is important to point out that there are many myths and false conceptions about speed reading such as *Fast readers are inaccurate readers* or *Slow readers make up for their plodding along by getting more out of their reading* or *Fast readers miss everything* or *Slow readers can't*

be expected to improve since they weren't taught to read quickly. All of these statements are false. This book contains proven steps which will show you how to succeed in achieving new reading skills.

Now you might say, "O.K. I can improve. You've convinced me. But how long will it take and what am I supposed to do?" The simple test of your reading speed and comprehension that you just completed already gives you some insight into the answer. Part of the answer also hinges on: *How much do you want to improve?* At what level or rate will you be satisfied with your reading?

To be more specific, some improvement will be seen in minutes! You've already taken the most important step just by reading this chapter. This book has already started you on a program to replace old reading habits with new, faster, and better reading techniques. If you are willing to practice a little as you read each day, you will be amazed at the improvement and change in your reading skills.

What about permanent improvement? If you inculcate these steps into your everyday reading habits, you will trade in your old reading skills for new ones and overhaul your reading style—permanently! There's no need for continued periodic practice or an annual retest. Speed reading is like using a muscle, to keep it in shape all you have to do is use it. As long as you use your new reading skills, you'll never revert to the old style of slow, cumbersome reading.

2

You're on Your Way!

Let's quickly review a few facts here. You know your reading speed and have a good idea of your comprehension level. You know how you compare to others who have a similar educational background. You have set a goal in terms of how fast you want to speed read. You have demonstrated the desire to improve. Now let's see if we can put it all together and watch your reading skills increase. The first step is to select a method.

THEORIES ON SPEED READING

There are many theories about how to improve one's reading rate and comprehension. The technique that has proven the most successful for most people is to change the eye movements they make in reading. In other words, the basic method of improvement is to make the eye motions or patterns more efficient. Since reading is characterized by eye movements, the question then becomes, how is this best done? This book shows you step-by-step methods to improve your eye movements over the thousands of words you read every day.

The book does not delve into other theories on reading,

such as the use of motivation or vocabulary techniques, because these methods in most instances have not achieved the desired results. For instance, there is a theory based on the rationale that a person will read faster if he or she is more interested in the material. I have found over many years of teaching reading that this is not always true. People often read slower when they like what they are reading, because they tend to savor each word or each line or each paragraph. On the other hand, some people do read faster when they read material they're deeply interested in. They become engrossed in what they're reading and the words begin to fly by. However, since some people read slower and some read faster when reading interesting material, this obviously isn't the best basis on which to improve your reading rate. It's too unpredictable and varies too much from person to person and from topic to topic.

Then there's the vocabulary method. This is based on the belief that when people build or expand their vocabulary then and only then will they read faster. But how could that be, when most people know most of the words they read every day and yet that doesn't make them read any faster. Once you're an adult, you know most of the words you see in ordinary reading matter. Even students in high school and college know *most* of the words they see every day. The fact that we periodically encounter new words does not negate our whole approach to reading speed and comprehension. (We will discuss vocabulary in more detail later in chapter 7.)

Another popular theory is that the eye will follow a moving object and therefore all you need to do is to move an object such as your finger, a pencil, or a ruler up and down the page at a fast clip and your eyes will follow accordingly so that you will soon be speed reading.

It is true that an eye will follow an object that moves across its path of vision, but who wants to depend on moving a finger or a pencil up and down the page in order to read faster? Those who like this method argue that you use these devices only in the beginning. Once you learn to read faster, you don't need them to keep your eyes moving rapidly across the printed page. But this isn't always the case because sometimes these techniques do become habit-forming.

Why not sidestep that whole debate and use a much easier method. What you want is to improve your reading so that you have the flexibility to read fast when you want to and to understand what you are reading. You wish to achieve this goal without taking a course in vocabulary building or being forced to read certain kinds of simple material so that you will read faster simply because it is easy. You don't want to rely on moving your fingers up and down a page in order to read faster.

This isn't to say these theories are all wrong. I'm simply pointing out that years of experience in teaching people of all age levels, and of varied backgrounds and education, have taught me what methods work for most people and what methods are the easiest to master. These concepts are presented for you in this book, along with practical exercises, so that you can immediately apply the new concepts of speed reading and actually see your progress.

Putting all these other theories aside, let us now look at the first secret to faster reading—improving your eye patterns. Good and bad eye movements are the result of our everyday reading habits. Very few schools teach eye patterns or movements. These movements are just assumed to evolve or happen naturally as a person learns to read.

Thus, bad habits are easily developed, which if not corrected, make us read slowly and ineffectively.

REGRESSIONS

One of the easiest habits to develop that really slows down the reader is called the *regression.* This is simply the backward eye movement or reading a word over again. Regressions are the back-up or reverse motions of the eyes. Most regressions are unnecessary and inefficient. They actually intrude on the logical sequence of the material you are reading. Some reading experts claim that *regressing is the most wasteful step in the average person's everyday reading activities.* This is just the opposite of what is often believed about reading, for many people have told me they had thought regressions improved their comprehension and speed—until they took my course. Then they found that as soon as they eliminated most of their regressions, their speed and comprehension began to increase.

Good readers glance back occasionally, but their regressions are few and far between. Let me put it this way: If you're after speed, you're not going to get it by going backward. Speed readers go forward at rapid rates with few backward eye movements.

There are two types of regressions. The *involuntary regression* is a habit from earlier years of reading. The *voluntary regression* is made under the controlled awareness of the reader to clarify a crucial point in the reading selection. The latter type of regression is occasionally needed, but should be used very sparingly.

Here is an example designed to show how both reading speed and comprehension are hindered by regressions:

Look at this sentence: NOW READ THIS QUICKLY. It contains words every adult knows. If a reader were to regress just one time on this sentence, here is how it would be perceived by the mind:

NOW READ NOW THIS QUICKLY.

Notice how awkward it is to read this sentence in its last form. What has happened is the insertion of "NOW" between the words "READ" and "THIS" because of the regression that was made. This insertion into the sequential pattern of words being sent to the brain's interpretation center is unnatural and confusing. Here is the actual pattern of the eye movements used when regressing on the word "NOW."

As you can see, a regression such as this causes confusion and certainly reduces comprehension—not to mention what it does to one's reading speed. That is why many people double or triple their reading rate and comprehension as soon as they begin to reduce or eliminate regressions. Here's how a fast reader would move his or her eyes over that same sentence:

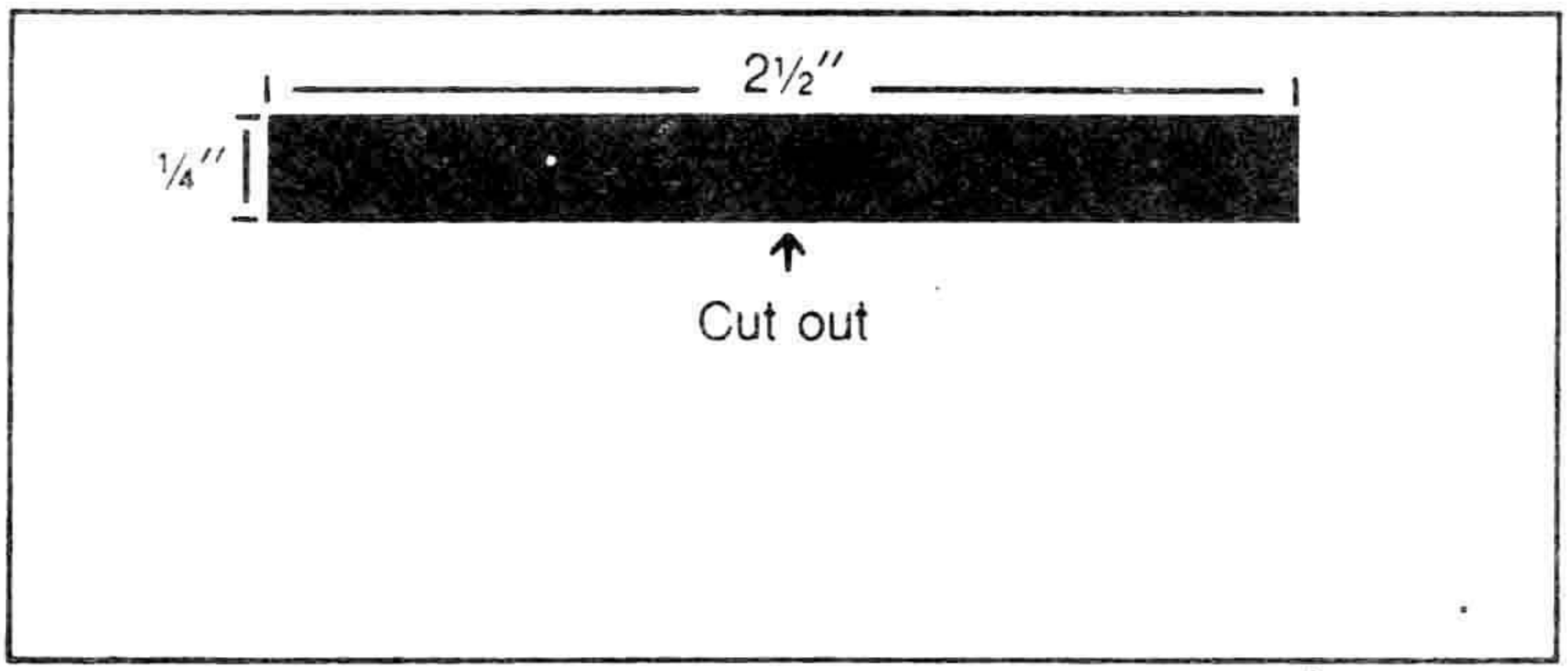
No hesitations. No backward eye movements. No reading the same word twice. No sporadic insertion of words into the basic sentence structure.

You can eliminate or greatly reduce the number of regressions by just having an awareness or desire to reduce

the regression habit. Reading once learned is a skill we put on instant replay whenever we need it. Regressions—going back over and over the letters and words as we stumble along in kindergarten or first grade—are necessary when we are first learning to read. But after that, regressions should be controlled and *not* made at random or from habit. They should be made sparingly and purposefully—in other words only when absolutely necessary.

If you don't want to rely on awareness or on trusting the eyes to self-correct this habit, there are some steps that will help you eliminate regressions. For instance, you can use a 3 × 5 index card with a *reading window* cut out of it. You make a reading-window card by measuring a rectangle 2½-inches long by ¼-inch high on a file card, then cut out the rectangle. A sample reading-window card looks like this:

READING-WINDOW CARD



After you've made the card, place it over the following columns. Move the card down the columns. Do you see how it prevents you from regressing? Do not permit yourself to move the card up or backward at any time. Continue to move the card down until you have read the entire