Vary Your Reading Rate

Good readers are flexible in their reading attack. Unlike the plodder, who reads consistently at 200 words per minute, or the superficial reader, who may read everything rapidly, well-trained readers have the capacity to adjust their speed to the material.

Rate adjustment may be overall adjustment to the article as a whole, or it may be internal adjustment within the article.

Overall adjustment is the basic rate at which the total article is read.

Internal adjustment is concerned with the necessary variations in rate that take place as each part of the material is read.

To illustrate this, suppose you plan to take a 100-mile trip. Since this is a relatively hard drive, with hills, curves, and a mountain pass, you decide to take three hours for the total trip, averaging about 35 miles per hour. This is your **overall** speed adjustment. However, in actual driving, you may slow down to no more than 15 miles per hour on some curves and hills, while on relatively straight and level sections you may drive up to 50 miles per hour. This is your **internal** speed adjustment. in short, there is no set rate which the good reader follows inflexibly in reading a particular selection, even though an over all rate is set for the total job.

Base your rate adjustment on:

1. Your purpose. What do you want to get from the material?
2. The nature and difficulty of the material.
3. The amount of previous experience you have had with this subject.

Your reading purpose: Circumstances will determine why you are reading and how much you have to get out of your reading. For example, a chapter may have been assigned in class, or you may be gathering material for a speech, or you may be trying to impress your friends by your knowledge of

Shakespeare. You need to be eminently clear not only on such **general purposes** but also on **specific purpose.**

To "get the gist," read very rapidly.
To understand general ideas, read fairly rapidly.
To get and retain detailed facts, read at a moderate rate.
To locate specific information, skim or scan at a rapid rate.
To determine value of material, skim at a very rapid rate.
To preread or postread, scan at a fairly rapid rate.
To read for enjoyment, read rapidly or slowly, depending on what you want.
To build general background, read rapidly.

Nature and difficulty of material: First of all, this involves an overall adjustment in rate to match you thinking ability. Obviously, overall level of difficulty depends on who's doing the reading. While Einstein's theories may be extremely difficult to most laypeople, they may be very simple and clear to a professor of physics. hence, the laypeople and the physics professor must make different overall adjustments in rate of reading the same material. General reading which is difficult for you will require a slower rate; simpler material will permit a faster rate.

A few broad suggestions may help you to select your rate(s) within the particular article:

Decrease speed when you find the following:

1. an unfamiliar word not made clear by the sentence. Try to understand it from the way it's used; then read on and return to it later. You may wish to underline the word so you can find it again quickly.

2. Long and uninvolved sentence and paragraph structure. Slow down enough to enable you to untangle them and get an accurate idea of what the passage says.

3. Unfamiliar or abstract ideas. Look for applications or examples which will give them meaning. Demand that an idea "make sense." Never give up until you understand, because it will be that much easier the next time. Find someone to help you if necessary.

4. Detailed, technical material. This includes complicated directions, abstract principles, materials on which you have scant background.

5. Material on which you want detailed retention. The key to memory is organization and recitation. Speed should not be a consideration here.

Increase speed when you find the following:

1. Simple material with few ideas new to you. Move rapidly over the familiar; spend most of your time on the few unfamiliar ideas.

2. Unnecessary examples and illustrations. These are included to clarify ideas. If not needed, move over them rapidly.

3. Detailed explanation and elaboration which you do not need.

4. Broad, generalized ideas. These can be rapidly grasped, even with scan techniques.

Skip that material which is not suitable for your purpose. While the author may have thought particular information was relevant, his/her reason for writing was not necessarily the same as **your** reason for reading.

Remember to keep your reading attack flexible. Shift gears from selection to selection. Use low gear when the going is steep; shift into high when you get to the smooth parts. Remember to adjust your rate **within** a given article according to the type of road you are traveling and to your purposes in traveling it. Most important, remember: Reading this paper hasn't done you and good. Not yet. You must **practice** these techniques until a flexible reading rate becomes second nature to you.