

# are your reading habits a liability?

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*Editor's Note: Extension workers do a tremendous amount of reading including letters, newsletters, reports, books, Journal of Extension. Improving one's reading skills could, of course, be described in a whole series of articles. Realizing, however, that we had limited space in this special issue, Brenda Foster was asked to write an overview article pointing out habits that might be problem areas for Extension workers with some simple possible solutions.*

**Brenda L. Foster**

How well are you keeping up with important developments in Extension? Are you bogged down by the amount of correspondence that crosses your desk daily? Perhaps you're a slow or poor reader. Becoming and remaining an active professional in Extension today requires that you read effectively.

## **A Million Words a Week!**

According to one leading business publication, most executives must read at least a million words a week. Almost half of their workday is used just to read communications that deal strictly with immediate business. This doesn't even include other business reading that helps them stay ahead of the game. Indeed, executives aren't the only ones whose time is drained by reading. Anyone in Extension who relies on written material for on-the-job information devotes a significant portion of the day to reading.

Have you ever stopped yourself from distributing a relevant or noteworthy article because you assumed no one would have extra time to read it anyway? How can you keep up with important developments in Extension, related and competitive organizations, memos, directives, financial reports, journals, and other correspondence? How much more effective could you be if you did all the reading you should do in half the time you now take? You could have a lot more time to spend planning and implementing Extension programs.

## **Importance of Effective Reading**

Effective reading is a thinking, interpreting, and assimilating process. It's not just a motor skill. Through gradual skill building the effective reader learns not only to read faster, but to understand more. Ineffective reading stems from the way most people were taught to read. Typically, you were taught to read out loud to the class using your finger as a pointer. One word was read at a time

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so the teacher could correct your mistakes. Word-by-word reading is the slowest and most ineffective way.

There are several advantages of effective reading:

1. It gives you more productive work time by doubling or tripling reading speed.
2. It helps you to interpret information accurately and act on it quickly because you learn to maintain comprehension at high reading speeds.
3. It helps you to get more out of what you've read by providing a systematic approach to more effective reading.
4. It increases the effectiveness of your organization.

### **Analyze Your Reading Habits**

You can increase your reading effectiveness by analyzing your reading habits. The following factors decrease reading rate:

1. *Limited perceptual span*—word-by-word reading.
2. *Slow perceptual time*—slowness of recognition and response to the material, perhaps including slow or inaccurate inter-fixation movement.
3. *Vocalization*, whether peripheral, latent, or cortical, including the need to vocalize to achieve comprehension.
4. *Faulty eye movements*, including inaccuracy in placement on the page, in return sweep, in rhythm, and regularity of movement, etc.
5. *Regression*, both habitual and as associated with habits of concentration.
6. *Faulty habits of attention and concentration*, beginning with simple inattention during the reading act and faulty processes of retention.
7. *Lack of practice in reading*, due simply to the fact that the person has read very little and has limited reading interests, so that very little reading is practiced in the daily or weekly schedule.
8. *Fear of losing comprehension*, causing the person to suppress his/her rate deliberately in the firm belief that comprehension is improved if he/she spends more time on the individual words.
9. *Habitual slow reading*, in which the person can't read faster because he/she has always read slowly.
10. *Poor evaluation* of which aspects are important and which aren't.
11. *The effort to remember everything* rather than to remember selectively.

## Increase Your Reading Rate

Since these habits may also reduce your comprehension, increasing the reading rate through elimination then is likely to result in increased comprehension as well. This is an entirely different matter from simply speeding up the rate of reading without reference to the conditions responsible for the slow rate. In fact, simply speeding the rate especially through forced acceleration, may actually result in making the real reading problem more severe. In addition, forced acceleration may even destroy confidence in ability to read. The obvious solution, then, is to increase rate as part of a total improvement of the whole reading process.

To increase your reading rate, establish the following necessary conditions:

1. *Have your eyes checked.* Before starting an effective reading program, make sure that any correctable eye defects you may have are taken care of by checking with your eye doctor. Often very slow reading is related to uncorrected eye defects.
2. *Eliminate the habit of pronouncing words as you read.* If you sound out words in your throat or whisper them, you can read silently only as fast as you can read aloud. You should be able to read most materials at least two or three times faster silently than orally. If you're aware of sounding out or "hearing" words as you read, try to concentrate on key words, meaningful ideas as you force yourself to read faster.
3. *Avoid regressing (rereading).* Usually, it's not necessary to reread words, for the ideas you want are explained and elaborated more fully in later contexts. Furthermore, the slowest readers usually regress most frequently; and because they read so slowly, their minds have time to wander and their rereading reflects both their inability to concentrate and their lack of confidence in their comprehension skills.
4. *Develop a wider eye-span.* This will help you read more than one word at a glance; and since written material is less meaningful if read word by word, this will help you learn to read by phrases or thought-units.
5. *Learn to adjust your rate to the purpose in reading and to the difficulty of the material being read.* This ranges from a maximum rate on easy, familiar, interesting material to a minimal rate on material that's unfamiliar in content and language structure, but must be thoroughly digested. The effective reader

adjusts his/her rate; the ineffective reader uses the same rate for all types of material.

### **Get Outside Help**

To be effective in Extension, it's important to be an active reader who can recognize typical patterns of organization found in informational writing, pinpoint your reading purpose, identify important information at a glance, and go after the information you want instead of finding it by chance. The learning or study center or speech department at your university may have some additional ideas on how you can practice faster reading.